

THE LIGHT BEHIND

MRS. WILFRID WARD



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THE LIGHT BEHIND

THE LIGHT BEHIND

By MRS. WILFRID WARD

Author of
“ONE POOR SCRUPLE”

“Dear God,” she cried, “and must we see
All blissful things depart from us or ere we go to Thee?
We cannot guess Thee in the wood or hear Thee in the wind?
Our cedars must fall round us ere we see *the light behind?*”

E. B. B.

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PART I

CHAPTER I

A WOMAN'S ORDERS

IT was too early in the spring for the heat to appear natural, but it was all the more delightful from the sense of unreality it conveyed, as if life were being converted unexpectedly into the atmosphere of childhood or of a fairy tale.

The Sussex forest country lay under a blue sky of extraordinary lightness. To right and left, as far as the eye could reach, stretched low ridges of hills, covered with small dark fir-trees and brilliant green larches, or brown and bare in ploughed fields, or again broken up into rough common;—an irregular, badly marshalled and furnished army of rough little headlands, ever hurrying into the plain, as if to rouse the rounded masses of the South Downs to come and meet them and try their mettle in the rich meadow-land between.

Under a double line of fir-trees, bent back by autumn winds, on one of the highest of these ridges, a few garden seats and a long deck chair had been carried out, and here three people were enjoying the view.

"I don't believe it is going to last, the downs are too clear by half," said Mr. Murdock, a youngish man, whose

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appearance suggested at once habits of society and farming, wealth and rusticity.

"Then I shall miss the sunshine, as well as you and your home, when I go away to-morrow."

The voice that spoke was low, sweet, and soft, but a little slow and emphatic, as if the speaker were accustomed to attention. She was a tall woman, leaning back on the deck chair, dressed with a simplicity that suggested the cotton frocks of the Trianon, as a comparison for costliness. But as an art creation, her appearance might have been indebted to a Sir Joshua, or to any distinctly English idealist, for its inspiration.

"Dear Lady Cheriton, if we could but persuade you to stay one day more."

"Dear Mrs. Murdock, you are so kind, and you know I would if I could."

"Your friends, too, who are arriving to-day," continued Mrs. Murdock,—she was one of those Americans who, for some occult reason, speak with a French accent—"they will be intolerable when they find that they are only to have you for one night. I am sure we shall not like each other at all."

"Oh, Mr. Biddulph I am sure you will like; as to Horace, if he bores you, give him some of the cigarettes you have given me, and send him out driving. No, seriously," and the slight figure turned in the *chaise longue*, till the dark face under the shadow of the big hat was bent full on her hostess, "I would have stayed, only that I promised Lord Cheriton to meet him in London to-morrow. I have to open the new wing of the Cottage Hospital at home next day."

A moment's silence followed this allusion to Lord Cheriton, and then a bright smile lit up her face.

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"Ah, here they are," she cried, as a waggonette came in sight, jolting over the rough country road behind the belt of fir-trees.

In it were seated two men, one elderly and stout, the other somewhat younger—thin, almost bony.

Lady Cheriton stood up, and held out both hands till the older man, who stumbled over the rough ground between them, not without smothered expletives, reached her side.

"How are you? This is delightful!"

"It is a very rough road," was the only answer, as he extended one large red and not very clean hand to meet the small white fingers.

"And was it not kind of Mrs. Murdock to ask you? Mrs. Murdock, this is Mr. Biddulph," in a tone of triumph. "Ah, and here is Horace. Did you leave Cheriton quite flourishing?"

One hand only was held out this time, and there was a subtle difference in her voice. Mr. Horace Colquhoun took it with an air of immense respect, as he murmured:

"I never saw him better."

The Murdocks surrounded the newcomers with an atmosphere of welcome, and Lady Cheriton told them that it had struck her only yesterday that she could not go away till she had shown them the view, and so her hostess had begged her to write and ask them. Meanwhile, Mr. Biddulph grunted at intervals, with apparently some intention of being polite, in a few of the lower sounds he emitted. Mr. Colquhoun, who had a pleasant, cool-sounding voice, with an intermittent tendency to purr, began his habitual task of making everybody feel happy. He really was perfectly astonished at the beauty of the country. The mere ordinary West Sussex to which he was accustomed gave one not the faintest notion of this sort of thing. What was

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that intensely fascinating seventeenth-century farmhouse they had passed on the way up? Was that really the Murdock's own house, where he was actually to stay the night?

"Lady Cheriton gave me no notion of this treat."

"Yes, it is quite charming," said Lady Cheriton, a little absently, as she sank again on the deck chair, "but, dear Mrs. Murdock, were you not going to take Horace for a drive? He would love it. And, if it really is not too troublesome, do you think somebody could bring Mr. Biddulph some tea?"

Mr. Biddulph's face brightened, as Mrs. Murdock acquiesced in all these orders, and before long he was left alone with Lady Cheriton and with tea in near prospect. He sat square and straight, with his right shoulder turned to the view, as if it aggravated his feelings, and occasionally he wiped his forehead with his handkerchief. Lady Cheriton, who was watching him, gave a low laugh, upon which his wrath spluttered over. It was most inconvenient; he had been exceedingly busy; would she never learn that while Parliament was sitting his time was as precious—

"As mine is valueless," she said, gravely, but he would not be stopped.

To bring him down on a piping hot day, when he was as likely as not to have heat apoplexy, to stay with an American who pretended to be a Parisian, just because Lady Cheriton chose to take her up.

"Yes, I thought you might give her a helping hand in society," said the other, maliciously.

And to travel with Horace Colquhoun's death's-head face, to come and talk humbug about a view and a farmhouse—it was damnable.

He flung the word at her as much as to say: "Take that, for you deserve it."

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Lady Cheriton was glad he had reached that word so soon; she knew it to be the high-water mark of wrath, after which the tide would turn.

Also the tea came from the bailiff's cottage, and was Chinese, and undeniably good, and Mr. Biddulph was softened by the thought that he would be able to teach Mrs. Murdock to make it still better by a pinch of a very fine Formosa brand, which was all it needed in order to be perfect. He turned his chair round to face the view.

Lady Cheriton looked at him affectionately. His hat was off, and a fine forehead rose above the rugged features and shaggy beard.

"The air is nice," he admitted.

"I suppose Horace talked to you on the way down?" asked Lady Cheriton, very seriously.

"Much more than I wished him to."

"What did he tell you?"

"Oh, much the same as usual."

Mr. Biddulph's voice, though still gruff in texture, was very gentle now. They were both silent, and both gazed at the distant hills. Mr. Biddulph, without looking round, said:

"I'm afraid you ought to face the fact that there will, as far as human eye can see, be nothing better to tell as long as Cheriton lives," and he sighed deeply.

"I know," said Lady Cheriton, "that things are worse just now, and that Horace wants to tell me so. I don't feel well enough for it, from Horace, at any rate. Why will they tell me things? Do they suppose I know nothing? Why not let me ignore what I choose to ignore?"

She closed her eyes as she lay back.

"Of course there is another side to the question. From your point of view, I mean," he answered. "There is

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something in what Colquhoun says, though he always annoys me by his way of putting a thing. He thinks that the point has come when you suffer in the world's eyes from enduring too much."

He paused.

"And you agree with him?"

The enquiry did not betray much anxiety as to what his answer would be.

"Well, I own that I wish there could be an end to a good many things; for instance, sending for people to come and see views."

"On hot days when they are busy, and Parliament is sitting, and the Permanent Under-Secretary is required at the Colonial Office," said Lady Cheriton, lightly.

"That's real mean," said Mr. Biddulph, but he admired the facility with which she could return to the surface.

"You deserve it," she replied, "but most of all for agreeing with Horace Colquhoun. I know he means well, and is a friend to us both, still——"

"That's just what I can't understand," interrupted Mr. Biddulph, impatiently.

Muriel Cheriton was silent for a moment, but she remembered that the time was passing, and she feared lest some of the party might disturb them. She leant forward and stretched out a hand towards him, while a half-pathetic, half-bewitching smile played over her face, reminding him of when he had first known her, when she had been hardly twenty. He could count ten years of a tried friendship.

"Well, what am I to do?" he grumbled.

"Save me from discussions with Horace. Tell him that you know that I know everything, even more than he does, and say that you can see that nothing will induce me to consent even to a separation. Don't say it as a message

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from me, but as your own conclusion; say you regret it if you like."

Mr. Biddulph did not speak at once; then he made another effort.

"Are you sure you are right? Is it best to fight any longer? You have pluck for anything, I know. Let me tell you just once," his voice shook a little, "that it has been the bravest thing I have known in a longish life. But do you know, it is at times more courageous to know when to yield, and to do it."

He saw something hard coming into her eyes, and her lips closed a little more firmly.

"Try," he said, "a simple, peaceful life, where truth is a matter of course. At least, don't throw away this opportunity without more thought."

"So you think me very untruthful?"

"Don't ask me what I think you, you know it," he said, quietly.

She rose and stood looking away from him.

"No," she said, "nothing can make it my duty to do that. You don't know anything about it. You must never say it to me again." Her voice rose wrathfully and seemed to sing away in a sharp note in the fir-tree over her head. "I have had a hard life, but I have made the best of it. I have filled it with work. My position is all my own doing. What woman with a good husband and children has done half so much as I, handicapped, insulted, calumniated? How would they go on at Cheriton, at Cumrock, at Cobden, without me? And even you don't see that I have had a career which has been the only thing that made life bearable. You ask me now to go and live at some dull dower-house, and to take something in London, furnished, for the season, and to give up . . . Oh," breaking off,

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partly because she saw a change in his face, "what silly things one says when one means something else."

Mr. Biddulph looked relieved. There was an element in this woman that had at rare moments grated on him; it was the element that reminded him of her mother, the mother who had been proud of marrying her daughter to such a man as Lord Cheriton. She had stopped, and yet what she could not bring herself to say would have annoyed him less. Anger, pride, love of power, ambition, he could have endured in her better than the clinging to the material things for which her mother had bartered her.

"Don't," he said, holding out a hand. "You are the best judge. Forget what I said. I had no idea, or I would not have spoken. The fact that you feel in this way is to me conclusive. Great heavens! Have not you the right to choose to go on enduring your present life? How should *we* interfere?"

She was trembling, and the rose colour had faded from her clear brown cheeks.

"Come, come," he said, "tell me exactly what I am to say to Colquhoun?"

And so he learnt his lesson, and they were friends again, and he agreed to go by an early train with her, and to mention the hour to nobody before she did, which latter point was a great concession, as he detested little mysteries.

Having secured all she wanted, she proposed to walk to the house. Everything seemed to promise well. The man who had asked to be allowed a private interview at Cheriton Abbey had been brought down to the Murdochs', where she could avoid seeing him alone; and a busy man, the permanent head of one of the chief Government offices, had come at her bidding to speak to him instead.

Mrs. Murdock, meanwhile, enjoyed showing the country

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to Mr. Colquhoun, but she enjoyed still better a little walk with him after they had sent the waggonette home, and Mr. Murdock had turned aside to visit the farm.

"Should we still find Lady Cheriton looking at the view," he enquired, "if we went that way?"

"I don't think so; she had letters to write; she is probably back at the house now."

Horace hurried the pace a little, but had to give it up, as his companion apologised for being a bad walker.

"She must have been pretty, and one feels it a grievance that she has begun to fade," thought Horace. And then somehow they talked a great deal about Lord and Lady Cheriton. Mrs. Murdock did not believe that the two men had been asked to stay at her house merely because Lady Cheriton had never before fully appreciated the Sussex forest country. Somehow, before they reached the singularly charming old house on the ridge of the hill, Mr. Horace Colquhoun had told her, bit by bit, and of course in confidence, the very things that he had come down there to tell Lady Cheriton. He had a great deal to say as to his own position as friend to both parties, and how exceedingly embarrassing he found it. There was n't a word, he knew, to be said for Cheriton, and yet he could not help having an affection for the old fellow. "He has been a good friend to me, and I shall stick up for him to the end." As to her, of course it was a privilege to be her friend; a finer, braver woman never trod the earth. Perhaps if she had been differently brought up— You could excuse a woman for thinking rather much of money who had been so entirely without it. Perhaps if she had in some ways been different, things might never have come to this; but those who know what the difficulties of a beautiful woman are—one must not be hard. And of course he (Horace) had been very

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much behind the scenes, and he should never abuse the confidence they had placed in him.

Mrs. Murdock felt that she had been clever in eliciting so much. A man, properly handled (she thought to herself), is generally a sieve.

Horace Colquhoun was grateful to her for giving him so quickly the opportunity for telling of Lord Cheriton's "latest," which he did with many circumstantial details, cheerfully borne by Mrs. Murdock, although hardly fitted to be repeated here.

When they returned to the house, he found that Lady Cheriton had gone to her room. He supposed that she meant to have the talk he had written to ask for, in the evening after dinner, or next morning.

CHAPTER II

AN AFTER-DINNER HYMN

“WHO is the handsome young man?”

Mr. Biddulph spoke in what he evidently meant to be a low voice to Lady Cheriton, as they waited in the wainscoted parlour for dinner to be announced.

Lady Cheriton, without looking round to see which of three young men present he intended to indicate, answered promptly:

“Henry Dacre.”

“I’ve heard of him, have n’t I?”

“You ought to have heard of him if you have n’t. Is it for me to tell you that he has written some exquisite verses and an article on Christian Socialism in the *Nineteenth Century*? ”

Mr. Biddulph grunted and chuckled sardonically.

“It is so exactly what I should expect to hear from you, as I suppose he told you so himself.”

“Don’t be cynical; come nearer the window, and look at the flowers going to bed in the dusk.” Then a little seriously, “I really want you to cultivate him. There is something so fresh and earnest about him. He is a Roman Catholic, but not of a tiresome kind.”

She finished her words in her usual slow accents, while her host waited to give her his arm.

“But this is wrong,” said Biddulph, as he found that he

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was reserved for the mistress of the house; "Colquhoun or one of the others; certainly not me, as it happens."

Though gruffly, it was not ungracefully said.

Mrs. Murdock had been advised by Mr. Colquhoun, who generally acted as an amateur private secretary and adviser wherever he found himself, to make Mr. Biddulph take her in to dinner. "Not that boy of Lord Hawkridge's," he said, looking at her other guests. "It is not a formal party."

"Why is he so bearish?" she said, in plaintive accents.

"Oh, he 's been spoilt, but like other rough animals he answers to a light hand."

Mrs. Murdock, however, did not find him answer at all. The fact was that he had made up his mind that he did not like her, and after he had told her how to improve her tea, he did not know what to say next. He would not even talk about the house, and how wonderfully well it had been arranged.

"Frankly, now," he said, "if you were quite truthful, would you not own that a nice new villa with windows you could open at the top, and ordinary washing-stands instead of oak chests that rasp your knees, and soft armchairs from Maple's, is on the whole the nearest approach to comfort in a sorry world?"

He meant her to laugh, and then they would have done better, but his tone had a touch of irritation which annoyed her, for Colquhoun had set him against this farmhouse business by his reiterated enthusiasm.

Presently he was relieved by hearing another and a favourite topic of his started on the other side of the table.

"Yes, Bunyan was at the siege of Leicester at the very date carved over the front door."

"Is that so?"

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Mr. Biddulph leant across towards the speaker, Henry Dacre.

"Did it ever strike you," he said, "how little feeling Bunyan had for nature? With all his use of 'delectable mountains' and 'sloughs of despond,' there is hardly a fine bit of insight into nature all through."

"It has struck me," said Dacre, "that he was no artist in his use of light and darkness. Contrast Christian's journey with Dante's."

"Yet, as a travelling tinker, he had plenty of opportunity; a better supply of sunsets than most of us see, and probably, in his early days, if he were not too drunk, of sunrises, too."

The young girl next to Mr. Biddulph, a sister of the host, gave a little laugh of merriment. He turned to her.

"You know your Bunyan?" he asked, kindly.

She shook her head.

"What are we coming to?" cried Mr. Biddulph, in tones of horror. "I suppose it was not a subject for examination, and so nobody thought of giving it to you," and he groaned.

"You surely would not want it to be made a text-book," cried Dacre, who was on the other side of the silent hostess.

"Heaven forbid. But, my dear young lady,—for I suppose," putting up his eyeglass to look at the girl of seventeen by his side, "you are young, and though you have, I am sure, passed many examinations, there is still hope for you—do confess to me, quite frankly, are you much bored by Shakespeare?"

And he chatted on very happily till nearly the end of dinner. "A nice little girl," he thought to himself.

Lady Cheriton was very gracious to Horace at dinner, and they had talked in their usual strain about her doings and interests at Cheriton, at Cobden, and in Scotland. To

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listen to them,—and Mr. Murdock had little else to do,—it would seem that there was nothing spiritual or material, benevolent, political, or æsthetic in the neighbourhood of her husband's domains that was not inspired and dominated by this beautiful woman. And it was more true than those impressions usually are, though Horace's flattery made it seem to the listener that among the advantages of the Countess of Cheriton must be a thirty-hour day and the gift of being in two places at once. Intermixed was a gentle good-natured banter as to Lord Cheriton's peculiarities, than which nothing could more easily and lightly suggest to the uninformed listener the intimate jokes of a happy home.

But after dinner, Horace felt himself to be a new-comer in a little circle that knew how to amuse itself. Mr. Murdock's sister was playing the violin, and Mrs. Murdock accompanying her. Lady Cheriton was leaning back on a cushion against the oak shutters of the open window; her gown was again almost aggressively simple, a muslin skirt and blue sash and a fichu edged with narrow lace half concealing the Cheriton pearls round the slim throat. Something white shone among the large free curves of the black hair. Her face was flushed to a soft rose tint. But although her complexion was extolled by artists, a great man's pencil sketch had proved that her beauty depended little on the accidents of colour. Mrs. Murdock's elaborate Parisian clothing looked singularly out of tune beside her guest. The violin was in tune, and in a girlish, immature fashion the player gave hints at inspiration not entirely spoiled by crude simple touches as they would have been by pretension.

A swift glance of welcome brought Mr. Biddulph to Lady Cheriton's side.

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"The music bores you?" in tones of apology.

"No, no, nonsense," he said. Then, after an effort to listen: "I like Dacre very much; we have been talking. But beyond the universal maxims of charity, why am I to be kind to him?"

"Well," said Muriel, a little eagerly, "if you will sit down here I will tell you why. I have had a good deal of talk with him and I think he really needs help. He has ambitions."

Biddulph grunted.

"And he has talents; but he has got a good many things against him. He feels very much not having been to a University. He was at school at a Roman Catholic college, and went on to a seminary, as he meant to be a priest."

"Then why is n't he a priest?" said Biddulph, a little sternly.

"Because he had no 'vocation.' The priests told him that his call was for life in the world. And now he is, so far, a briefless barrister, and he is intensely keen to have a political career, only you see he has no friends who can do anything for him, either at the bar or in any other way, and no one to teach him how to get on."

"What is his family?" said the listener, in a businesslike tone that showed Muriel a dawning interest in what she was saying.

"He comes of a very old family of Catholic squires," she answered, with a wave of the hand, intended to indicate many past generations, "but I infer that for many years they have lived quite out of the world. His father is dead and his eldest brother is evidently very dull. He has good connections, but they are quite without interest in public life. They can't see why he should want to do more than make a decent income at the bar, so as to be able to marry. I know the sort of people exactly."

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"It is curious," said Biddulph, "how many of the present generation of young Roman Catholics are trying to come forward. I have met several of them lately who are pathetically eager to plunge into the public life of the country from which their families used to keep aloof even after the removal of their disabilities. But these youths are too crude and self-opinionated; somehow they have so little sense of proportion. Still one forgives a good deal to earnest youth when it is in a first rate state of effervescence. But this protégé of yours is not so crude intellectually; he has a very good manner and I suppose good clothes?"

"Yes, he has an extraordinary social instinct," answered Lady Cheriton decisively, with the great lady's sense of her infallibility on that topic.

"And he is modest, too," Mr. Biddulph went on, very willing to please her. "I am accustomed to having to listen to the boys nowadays, and they are much worse than even a violin. I think I will get Colquhoun to come and talk in the cowhouse or whatever they call the room they smoke in. You are tired?"

He spoke a little tenderly, and she put her fingers on his arm with a caressing gesture for a moment, and made no answer.

"There, they want Dacre to do some parlour trick. Don't sit too long by that window. After all, though I did nearly have heat apoplexy, it's only April, and the wind is treacherous."

"Why, it's breathless," cried Lady Cheriton, turning her face to him.

"Take care, all the same": then, as Dacre moved towards them, "now I have talked with him I don't think him so oppressively good-looking. Why was the back of his head

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cut so straight off, and could n't you cure him of working his nostrils like a horse?"

He chuckled a little, and moved towards the piano.

"They want me to read that thing of Lamennais I spoke of this morning; shall I?"

Henry Dacre stood waiting his orders with an eager look in his dark eyes. For several days he had done nothing without permission.

"Oh, do. Make them all come over here."

So Mrs. Murdock, who was chilly, and Mary Murdock, who was in the agonies of first love for Lady Cheriton, came close to the open window.

"Oh, don't let Mr. Biddulph go," cried Lady Cheriton, eagerly, "not till this is read." She leant forward with the imploring countenance of a child.

A second later, a strong, clear, man's voice rose above the little party, with a touch of solemnity that might recall an old air in *Hymns Ancient and Modern*; but it suggested as it went on a larger, if not less solemn cadence, as it gave forth the fullest utterance that ever came from the stormy, religious and undisciplined nature of the Abbé Félicité de Lamennais.

There was no movement, but Mrs. Murdock, who had been excited by the music, feeling that nerve-thrill which is so sought after by the moderns, leant forward, straining her eyes at the reader. Little Mary's eyes filled with tears, and to Lady Cheriton came one of those moments of supreme distraction, which she fed upon greedily. There was so much, so very much, that she longed to forget.

Catching the thrill from his audience, and the instinct of eloquence being in his nature, Henry Dacre brought out the words as it seemed from the very soul of him:

"Ils ont aussi passé sur cette terre, ils ont descendu le fleuve du temps; on entendit leurs voix sur ses bords, et

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puis on n'entendit plus rien. Où sont-ils? Qui nous le dira? Heureux les morts qui meurent dans le Seigneur.

“Pendant qu'ils passaient, mille ombres vaines se présentèrent à leurs regards; le monde que le Christ a maudit leur montra ses grandeurs, ses richesses, ses voluptés; ils le virent, et soudain ils ne virent plus que l'éternité. Où sont-ils? Qui nous le dira? Heureux les morts qui meurent dans le Seigneur.

“Semblable à un rayon d'en haut, une croix dans le lointain apparaissait pour guider leur course; mais tous ne la regardaient pas. Où sont-ils? Qui nous le dira? Heureux les morts qui meurent dans le Seigneur.

“Il y en avait qui disaient; qu'est-ce que ces flots qui nous emportent? Y a-t-il quelque chose après ce voyage rapide? Nous ne le savons pas, nul ne le sait. Et comme ils disaient cela, les rives s'évanouissaient. Où sont-ils? Qui nous le dira? Heureux les morts qui meurent dans le Seigneur.

“Il y en avait qui semblaient dans un recueillement profond écouter une parole secrète, et puis, l'œil fixé sur le couchant, tout à coup ils chantaient une aurore invisible, et un jour qui ne finit jamais. Où sont-ils? Qui nous le dira? Heureux les morts qui meurent dans le Seigneur.

“Entraîné pêle-mêle, jeunes et vieux, tous disparaissaient, tels que le vaisseau que chasse la tempête. On compterait plutôt les sables de la mer que le nombre de ceux qui se hâtaient de passer. Où sont-ils? Qui nous le dira? Heureux les morts qui meurent dans le Seigneur.

“Ceux qui les virent ont raconté qu'une grande tristesse était dans leur cœur; l'angoisse soulevait leur poitrine, et, comme fatigués du travail de vivre, levant les yeux au ciel, ils pleuraient. Où sont-ils? Qui nous le dira? Heureux les morts qui meurent dans le Seigneur.

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"Et nous aussi, nous irons là d'où partent ces plaintes ou ces chants de triomphe. Où serons-nous? Qui nous le dira? Heureux les morts qui meurent dans le Seigneur."

Mr. Biddulph watched them as he listened to the words he knew so well, with the tragic sequel of the apostate's history in his mind. It had not been a large nature that had been driven forth by petty persecution; but what a large utterance! And these women that heard could take it as an after-dinner amusement! First a delicate repast, then a violin telling a passage from an opera, and then those awful words. What was it? What did it mean? Which of the three had they enjoyed the most? It perplexed him, and he felt a sensation of pity and of fear. The Roman Catholic, the American woman, Muriel Cheriton, the child, and himself—

"Où serons-nous? Qui nous le dira? Heureux les morts qui meurent dans le Seigneur."

There was a silence after Dacre had finished, and Mrs. Murdock leant back with a sigh of enjoyment. Dacre moved towards the window, silently seeking a glance of appreciation from Lady Cheriton. It came, and then—

"Oh, go on; read us something else; it is the last night." She turned to Mr. Biddulph: "You enjoyed it?"

"I must own I like to take my pleasures less sadly," he answered; "I belong to an earlier generation—which had its own way, after all, of playing with the terrible. I, too, could recite a tragedy. Do you know the harrowing story of 'Billy Bowlane'—?"

Lady Cheriton's brow puckered; she thought he was going to be tiresome.

"Please don't," she said, a little fretfully.

"No, no; I advise some of the hardest bits of Browning, and I shall go and smoke, while you revel in the incomprehensible."

CHAPTER III

A GLEAM THRO' THE CEDARS

M R. BIDDULPH, as soon as he found himself in his room, lit his candles, and settled down to two hours of answering letters. Then came his long night prayers, at which he dozed and roused himself and dozed again, and repeated them three or four times till he was satisfied that he had done his best, and then with a weary sigh, and little sweetness of spirit, got him to bed. He would have been equally astonished and pained had he known how he had hurt his friend that day.

Muriel, with a mind that would fain have rested, had too much experience to love the night. After the day's toils, worries, and misunderstandings, at length comes the hour of silence, solitude, darkness; and yet at times that is, to many of us, the worst of all.

She had thrown open the lattice window, and, wrapped in a great white cloak, was sitting looking out at the darkness, her mind dwelling persistently on Mr. Biddulph's desertion, as she chose to call it. Very reserved people are seldom happy in their confidences. Their moments of expansion are too important, too much dwelt on; like misers, when they give at all they expect great results, results in proportion to the greatness of the effort on their own part.

Muriel, shut up in a world of her own, idealised what human intercourse might be, if she could let down the

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barriers to the right person. And Mr. Biddulph had won and kept that place in her mind for ten years.

"Some day I will tell it all to him," she had often said to herself, and now she had a special secret to tell him.

For how perfectly had he once helped her. Ten years ago, a woman of only twenty, already broken-hearted, as she thought, struggling still to find some joy in youth and life, had had opened to her a vision of joy and love, forbidden only by a vow already despoiled and desecrated by her husband. Mr. Biddulph was, perhaps, quicker to see and understand ten years ago; he had saved her from the mirage, had bade her fix her eyes on a higher point, on the horizon between two worlds. With exquisite delicacy and tact he had devoted himself to her, and his admiration for her from that time knew no bounds. Nothing he had come across had been more touching, had felt its way to his heart as did this soul-struggle. They had seldom, if ever, during those months spoken in words to each other of what she was suffering, but she had come to him and spent hours at a time with him, had more than once pleaded an engagement with him as a reason for avoiding other things and, above all, one other person.

One night, Lady Cheriton had suddenly driven to his rooms, to tell him that she must leave her husband, that she had decided to go, and that nothing could now prevent it. He knew by the fact of her coming that the crisis was in reality past,—that she would not go at all; that she had come instead to find refuge in a tenderness that had the divine characteristic of never sparing her present suffering, any more than he could spare himself in her service. He was more than fifty then, a widower, a very successful man, and a centre of many sorts of men and women whom he

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constantly helped, in a thousand ways. But no one owed him more than Muriel.

From that time she had put him on a pedestal, and, according to Horace Colquhoun, she had spoilt him shockingly. Besides which habit of indulging him, she had a way of treating his remarks, on literature especially, as final and decisive. She liked to think that he had formed her mind, and said so even to people who were not very much interested in the matter.

However, years passed on; she fought her fight and conquered temptation and won the world's good opinion. Instead of a beautiful, childless, forsaken, much-to-be-pitied woman, left on one side by the great man who had married her, she had reversed the positions. She had become the centre of his world, the person whose wishes were to be consulted, and who could be relied upon to carry things on when he failed, which he did so often that, at last, he was left mostly alone; it was so much easier to go to Lady Cheriton. All men are inclined to be angry with those whom they have greatly injured, and they usually dislike women for the weakness which they have trampled on. But Lord Cheriton feared his wife, with the impotence of a weak, sensual nature that struggled helplessly with one stronger than itself.

In this ten years of life and work, Muriel had grown not happy, but fully occupied. She had the sort of pleasure in doing things well that may, in imagination, make daily life to a woman of her position what a successful session is to a statesman. She hardened, perhaps, and grew contented with her own aims, and did not look too closely into the motives of a woman so undoubtedly high principled and correct as herself. Meanwhile she took her friend's point of view for granted. Had he not ten years ago urged her to

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take up all manner of work and interests, had he not made her realise her own powers of organisation, had he not helped to transform Cheriton, the village, the school, the tenants? And now to-day, after a few words from Horace Colquhoun, inspired by her husband, who was too much afraid of her to do anything himself, Mr. Biddulph, in the very talk she had planned as one of her rare moments of confidence, suggested to her to give it all up, to abdicate, to leave her little kingdom to go to rack and ruin, and to acknowledge herself defeated.

It seemed so hard to be thrown back in this way when intending to tell him a secret which she could not bring herself to tell anybody else. It was a chilly fear as to her own health, that she tried to make light of, but that the doctor at Cheriton wished her to treat seriously. He was only an old country practitioner after all, and he had wished these many years to be called up to the Abbey to prescribe for Lady Cheriton. He was not likely to own that there was really nothing the matter with her.

Muriel had meant to tell this trouble to Mr. Biddulph, and she had looked forward to receiving the tenderness and sympathy she knew so well, intensified by the confidence. Instead of which, he had repulsed her, and shut her up within herself, and she forgot that she had not really told him of those fears at all. She had half meant, too, to tell him of certain aspirations, certain yearnings, after a more spiritual life that had arisen from this anxiety. But Mr. Biddulph had stopped all this with his extraordinary suggestion of a separation. He had deserted her standard, and had seemed to imply a real disapprobation of herself!

It was the note of disapprobation in her old friend that had stung so sharply. Perceiving little, what he did perceive impressed him the more, and, being human, the exceeding

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inconvenience to himself had given edge to his dislike to the manoeuvring that had brought him to the Murdochs. It had passed quickly and was forgotten by him ; he had abandoned instantly that idea of a separation when he realised how she felt about it. But, somehow, the incident had made something uncertain and crumbling about her,—it was her ideal of herself.

Surrounded by admirers, many genuine, others counterfeit, and with a few declared enemies, simple disapprobation was almost unknown to her. Coming from Mr. Biddulph, it made her feel lonely and troubled. She asked herself with pathetic yearning, what she could do in this difficult way of life that she had not done. There was no articulate answer in her mind, but a great disgust came over her, a nausea for the things, and the ways, and the words, of a life conformable with the world. It did not amount to a struggle. Only the surface of her soul was troubled. Had the angel of God passed that way?

CHAPTER IV

THE FRIENDS IN THE TRAIN

M R. and Mrs. Murdock were up in time to see Lady Cheriton off next morning. She had breakfast in her room and came down only the moment before the carriage was announced. Mr. Biddulph had meanwhile greatly softened Mrs. Murdock's heart while he ate his own breakfast by his knowledge of gardening and enthusiasm on the subject. Lady Cheriton had, on the other hand, evidently lost her enthusiasm for the farm, and the joys of her visit, and Mrs. Murdock felt that the invisible barriers between herself and her guest, which had fallen away during the last few days, had risen up again in the night. In a travelling cloak that might have appealed to a Burne-Jones, and with her little flat bag of green leather holding her correspondence, she appeared to look beyond Mrs. Murdock as she murmured, half absently, gracious words of thanks, while her eyes sought her maid and the boxes.

"One thing more done," seemed to be suggested by the graceful shoulders, as the carriage rolled away in the spring sunlight.

The first part of the journey was spent by the friends in the reserved carriage in looking over their letters; the morning papers were not to be got so early.

"Your bag and even your packets of letters look more official than mine," said Mr. Biddulph.

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"All is not real business that is tied up in red tape."

"No, alas! I have not been occupied in her Majesty's service this forty years without knowing that." Then, as she shut her bag and made ready to talk: "I spoke to Colquhoun last night. I certainly have reached a state of perfect obedience. I wonder if it is really as profitable a condition for the soul as the mystics would have us believe."

"Quite, if you have faith that never falters; and now you must tell me what was said."

Mr. Biddulph, looking out of the window, went on:

"He was dreadfully put out at finding that you were going to leave so early. But it never entered his head that he could get up at such an hour. I said nothing much, except to assure him that there was nothing more to be said. And he proceeded to tell me a great many things—most of them painful, and I think it hardly desirable to repeat them to you."

"No, we need not particularise, and I don't want names. But I suppose the principal thing was the party at Cobden. It is the first time," and a little sigh passed lightly from her lips, "that he has actually done anything disreputable in one of his own houses, and they thought it would force me to act. Was there anything else of a public kind which he wanted me to know?"

"Nothing but a few drives in the park."

"Oh, yes; well, Cobden can't be filled by those sort of people again for some weeks. I am going to lend it to Jane and Anne. After that we shall be having the usual garden parties there. I never try to see ahead more than six weeks."

"How is dear Lady Anne?"

"I have heard nothing of her for ages before to-day, when I got a letter from Lady Massingham hinting rather broadly

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that it would be rather nice if I took Anne out in London when I come up. It provokes me because it is exactly what I have been wishing to do. Lady Massingham's hints are nearly enough to make me give it up."

"Poor Lady Massingham. I doubt if a better step-mother ever trod the earth. Still the woman is a bore."

"Yet his first wife, my mother's only sister, was the most charming woman. Much too good for Lord Massingham; but she met him just after she horrified her family by becoming a Roman Catholic. He is a pillar of the Papists' faith, and I suppose that was the attraction."

"I can imagine that Lady Anne had a charming mother. I do hope you will have her in London with you."

"Not if you pay her outrageous attentions, as you did at Cobden last year."

Mr. Biddulph chuckled.

"I was quite as devoted to Lady Jane. How is Lady Jane?"

"Well, she has just had a little boy, so of course everything is doing well."

"Really, I am very glad. She had a girl last time. Nice things ought to happen to Lady Jane. Where is she?"

"Poor Jane; she is in a semi-detached brick villa in Hempville—of all abominable suburbs. Fancy what a semi-detached villa must be like, when inhabited by Jane."

"What took her there? I thought he was in the army."

"It is because Uncle Massingham made him promise that he would leave the army when the regiment came home from Egypt, and go into business, to provide a few extras for Jane's bread and butter. So now he toils in and out of the City, and I believe is already aware that that need not mean picking up gold and silver."

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"Poor Lady Jane," murmured Mr. Biddulph kindly, "it won't suit her to be poor."

"After Massingham, too! Dear me, in the days when mamma and I used to scrape up enough for third-class tickets to go to Massingham, and leap out of the train so that the footman might not catch us—what an abode of luxury it seemed. The only domestic disturbance there I ever remember was when the third footman refused to help the steward's room boy to bring the dinner to the house-keeper's room. As a general thing the servants ruled the family very kindly."

"Yes, she must find it a hard change," said Biddulph, "but happily she is not of the sort that will let love fly out of the window, whatever comes in at the door."

"I suppose not," said Muriel, indifferently.

It was not a long journey, and they were soon groaning over the queer ways of the South-Eastern Railway, before they could get out in London.

"By the way, I asked for Dacre's address, and told him to come and see me in London. I suppose that that was your intention?"

"Yes, and by the way, I want you to take him for your secretary."

"As my secretary! How could I have him as my secretary? If I got him into the Colonial Office—and I fancy he is too old to go in for the examination—he would have to work his way up for years before I could take him as my secretary. How like a woman!"

"How like a man to jump at the idea that I mean anything of the kind!" and Lady Cheriton leant back, smiling. "Of course I know all that and I don't in the least want to make him one of your humdrum official sort of clerks, with no future."

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"Except to become a humdrum permanent official in the end like your humble servant!"

"As if there were any chance of any other permanent head holding the position that you do!" cried Muriel, glancing at him proudly. "You could have been in the Ministry and even the Cabinet if you had only chosen."

"Stuff and nonsense," said Biddulph, a little roughly; "I do really wish you would not exaggerate in this way."

"Very well, I won't say any more if you will let me explain what I mean about Mr. Dacre. I only want him to be your own private secretary for your own private affairs, instead of Mr. Whitehead."

"But what good would that do him? And as to a future?"

"Well, and what was Mark Ronalds once upon a time, and what is he now?"

"Oh, Mark Ronalds was quite a peculiar case. I never did anything for him. He fell on his legs by an extraordinary bit of luck and he was only my secretary for a year. Then the Prime Minister took a fancy to him. It is curious how lucky some men are. I sent him to show the proofs of my article on the Berlin Conference, for *The Quarterly*, to find out if there was anything the great man objected to, and that gave him a career which only collapsed into a title."

"But don't you see that you were his true opportunity? and I want you to be Mr. Dacre's opportunity, too. And he really writes well. It won't be half as absurd if people suppose that he has written your next epoch-making article!"

"Base flatterer," murmured Mr. Biddulph; "and what is to become of poor Whitehead?"

"He is not half good enough for you."

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"But I am good enough for him, poor fellow."

"Nonsense; you have often said you could not stand him much longer. I 'll find him something else."

"You dare to meddle, and I 'll——"

"I dare most things,"—she smiled her sweetest as she rose from her seat,—“but I dare not say all the thanks I feel.”

"Stuff and nonsense," murmured Mr. Biddulph, and as he saw her drive away in a coupé, followed by a good deal of attention from the bystanders, he said to himself: "I wonder how Dacre will suit me as a private secretary, for it is clear that I am to have him." Then, "Poor child, poor child!" he muttered aloud, as the brilliant figure in the coupé passed out of sight. A barefooted street arab thought that the words applied to himself, and asked for, and obtained, a penny, without discovering his mistake.

The rest of Lady Cheriton's day in London was chronicled by her husband, in a note to Colquhoun:

So, most wise Horace, I need not feel anxious as to losing my bet. Seven thousand pounds are not trembling in the balance. The wise friend who was to free me from my bonds by his diplomacy has not apparently done much. I was strolling down Piccadilly, when a coupé stopped a little way in front of me. From it alighted my gorgeous Countess, and the happy pair strolled on together. Both there and in the Park we met many friends who stared a little, perhaps, but were most effusive. It ended in my seeing her off with pomp from St. Pancras in the saloon carriage she had engaged to take her home. It does not look exactly as if she had been driven to the verge of a separation.

Still ever yours,

CHERITON.

P. S.—By the way, she mentioned that she had offered to lend Cobden to her poor relations. I must own in candour that, much as I should like to be rid of her, she is a very fine creature and a born diplomat.

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Colquhoun was annoyed as he read the letter. He was annoyed with Cheriton for harping in this way on that bet. Cheriton really seemed to think that Colquhoun was taking all this trouble on his behalf simply to win £7000. He had only said, "Done," as half a joke when Cheriton had said, "£7000 to a fiver, you don't succeed in making her agree to a separation before this day twelvemonths."

They had both no doubt had a great many brandies and sodas at the time, but he knew he could trust Cheriton's word absolutely, and he did not want to be constantly reminded of the money in this crude way.

CHAPTER V

HENRY DACRE

HENRY DACRE was the second son of a Catholic house, of old family but very modest fortune, which had kept for generations to the life, and been content with the culture, of Lancashire squires, differing little in degree from yeomen of the better sort. He was even as a boy unlike his brothers and his other relations, and little understood by them. They thought him a very odd boy, with outlandish ideas. He was a poor shot, and "hardly seemed to know his way about." And when his father once entertained at dinner the luminaries of the law on circuit, Henry being at the time a boy of fifteen, great had been the astonishment of the family, who were for the most part silent in the presence of so much intellect, to find Henry taking an active part in the conversation, and an object of undisguised admiration to the brilliant talkers assembled round the table.

It was soon after this that his father died somewhat unexpectedly, and a little later Henry went to Stonyhurst—his rather delicate health having hitherto kept him at home. He was regarded by his masters as clever, though somewhat erratic, and was one of the few really eloquent members of the Boys' Debating Club. The time came when his friends asked him as to his future. His relations,—the large cousinhood of Dacres and Bromleys,—when they were not eldest sons, had turned for the most part to farming

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or brewing, or entered the offices of solicitors or land agents. Henry showed the greatest repugnance to all these careers; and his advisers seemed to be at the end of their tether.

But Henry soon decided for himself. His uncle, a Jesuit, who had done great things in India, and had to tell of work almost suggestive of Paraguay,—of the wonderful influence the fathers had won over the natives, paid the family a long visit on his return to England. Henry was constantly with him, drinking in all the particulars of the work of that great world-wide Society. Father Dacre preached in the village church with the eloquence of the heart and Henry was fascinated. No one had hitherto thought of Henry in connection with the priesthood. He was, perhaps, of all his family, the least given to devotional exercises. But now he gave out, when his uncle had departed, that he meant to be a priest—perhaps a Jesuit, if the life were not too hard. Anyhow, he would first try his vocation in a seminary.

In that seminary he stayed two years. He had a following among the “divines,”¹—“Dacreites” they were called,—and his friends looked on him as almost a future Bossuet—a leader of men, an orator, destined to be a great figure. The professor of dogma complained that Dacre shunned the routine work of his daily thesis—though he crammed the examinations, and passed them fairly. He was not, the professor said, a satisfactory student and did not really work. Quite the opposite was the opinion of the professor of sacred eloquence, who coached the divines for their *prônes* (or trial sermons) and corrected their essays. A man who had written against time such an

¹ “Divines” is the equivalent of “divinity students” at English Catholic seminaries.

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essay or such a sermon as he was proud of showing to friends of the college could certainly, he said, be no idler.

Dacre had a taste for church history and the liturgy. A little knot of divines met periodically to read papers on liturgical subjects; and one of the most zealous of their number proposed that they should, like priests, recite the office daily. In this habit some of them persevered; but Dacre, after a week's trial, found that his other labours left him insufficient time for it. But he still remained a great authority on the liturgy, and wrote a moving essay on the history of the daily liturgical chaunt of the monks in the Middle Ages. The oldest and most experienced of the authorities were never sure that he would be a priest. Nor were those divines who were not "Dacreites." But all were surprised at the suddenness of his resolution to change his future course. It followed on the visit to the college of a Mr. Long, Q.C., who was in Parliament. He was a convert and devoted to Catholic interests. His excellent practice at the Bar brought him a sufficient income to indulge his political tastes. He wanted some clever "divine" to act as an amanuensis while he stayed at the college, helping him to sort and copy various documents connected with educational schemes which he was to support in Parliament. Dacre was chosen for this purpose. Mr. Long was immensely struck with his ability. To Dacre Mr. Long's career opened out a new idea of the possibilities of life. That a Catholic layman should be not a brewer, or a stock-broker, or a solicitor, but a leader of men and in Parliament had never before dawned upon him as possible. Less than three months from this date he left the college, was entered at Lincoln's Inn, and began to eat his dinners for the Bar.

This was four years before he met Lady Cheriton, and now she could tell Mr. Biddulph of his achievements, how

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her new friend had written exquisite verses, and had got an article in the last *Nineteenth Century*, but that he felt keenly the want of connection and of influence to help him in his wish for a political career. Whereby it may be seen that Henry had learnt several things since he went up to London, thinking that a man's character and talents would suffice by themselves. He had learnt several things, and perhaps forgotten some others in the excitement of that plunge into so very new a life. But there are many worlds in a complex civilisation, and after he had spent two days at the Murdochs', he felt the fresh excitement of entering into another new one. The visit was a great pleasure to him. He had seen very little of society with a big "S," and he was more fitted for the best parts of that world in consequence of his ignorance of the ways in other social strata. Lady Cheriton felt in him great adaptability and great ignorance, and this, combined with unusual talents and much ambition, made him interesting and amusing.

"He is so fresh and charming, and yet so strong," she told Mrs. Murdock, emphasising each adjective; "it is so delightful to hear all his hopes and ambitions. Do you know that he is to be something very great indeed? I can't quite see what, but I suppose a prime minister."

And after that, Mrs. Murdock had tried the rôle of confidante herself, but found that his dark eyes could be very negative and unresponsive, and so desisted.

Henry had explained to Lady Cheriton, in the first walk they took together, that to be a poet was not his great aim.

"I'm not the real article," he said, "and thank Heaven I know it."

Then had followed the delightful discovery that she had read his article on *Christian Socialism*, and had been deeply

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interested in it; and he was too tactful to attempt an enquiry into how much of it she could recollect.

The immediate practical future was much more insisted on by her than by him.

"I think you ought to have some definite post. I should like you to be connected in some way with the House of Commons, so that you might learn the ropes. You see you must be So-and-So's private secretary, or whatever it is, 'who writes so well,' not Henry Dacre, the poet or essayist who has other ambitions."

Pacing the long path in the carelessly ordered kitchen-garden on the Sussex hill, Henry had been educated, by light touches, and suggestions only half consciously assimilated. She knew far better than he did how a young man should tread the stepping-stones to greatness, and she was most willing to teach his inexperience. She was refreshed, but almost startled, at the vigour and intensity with which he approached many things, to her so humdrum and commonplace.

But with all his efforts to be definite, she felt rather that his ambitions were in a luminous and pure haze, with big outlines, moving and interchanging in an uncertain manner. For besides this prime-minister idea, was he not a son of the Catholic Church, and also a lover of the poor, and, though last and least, also a poet? One thing she tried to touch on, with the lightest touch, and entirely from a psychological interest—had he ever been in love? What was his general attitude as to women? But something in the dark eyes, not the chill gaze that had met Mrs. Murdock's, something indeed more like the shrinking from half-guessed-at possibility of pain, on the face that had seemed till then hard, in its youth and hope, made her change the subject instantly.

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They had been standing under two large oak-trees on the plot of grass that bounded the Murdocks' sweet-peas and potatoes. The sun flickered down on them and Henry had stood and looked at her for a second only, but it seemed to him a long one. And she had suddenly reminded him that they were late for luncheon, in a tone that seemed to close that morning's talk in a flat need for mutton and jam tartlets.

As the carriage that took Lady Cheriton and Mr. Bid-dulph to the station the next day disappeared from sight, Henry hurried down-stairs and met Mr. and Mrs. Murdock as they turned on the narrow flagged path from the carriage drive to go back to the house.

"Too late; she has gone," said the hostess kindly, but not without a little amusement at the expression of dismay on his face.

"I had no idea she was going so early," he said, and then he suppressed, just in time, the words that rose to his lips: "And she did not even say good-bye."

With that effort came self-consciousness enough to make him rouse himself not very successfully to enter into the talk at breakfast. But he wanted to escape as soon afterwards as he could, and leaving the Murdocks and the two young men guests, who seemed to him very uninteresting, and the dogs and the Persian cat, to make a noise together, he sauntered off, with a volume of Browning, to the hill with the great view, where he sat him down and mused a bit dolefully on the departed guest.

Why had she not said that she was going so early? Why had she not left a message for him? Or was it possible that she had left a message, and that Mrs. Murdock had not delivered it on purpose to tease him? It would not be unlike Mrs. Murdock to keep it back until she could worry

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him with it when they were alone. He had certainly understood that Lady Cheriton was staying till after luncheon. Had she not said something of the afternoon trains being the best? And so he had told his hostess that he could not stay till next day, but would like to go up in the afternoon. It was really very tiresome. He had so much that was important to say to Lady Cheriton, though it might well be wondered if there were anything of importance about himself that he had not told her in two days and three evenings. Still, of course there was a very great deal more to be said, and he crossed his legs, and sighed at the thought of how badly he had expressed what he wanted to tell and to ask, while she was there. He wondered, too, rather wistfully, if he had really talked too much of his own concerns, and had bored her, though she was too kind to show it.

He need not have been afraid; he had been a most opportune distraction and amusement to his new friend.

Looking round while he was recalling the joys of the day before, he saw Horace Colquhoun slowly strolling through the wood, with the morning paper in his hand and a cigarette in his mouth. Henry opened his Browning thereupon, and began to read *The Statue and the Bust* diligently, wishing that he had chosen a less obvious spot to muse in. Horace's lined face was drawn round his eye-glass into a benevolent smile, as he sat down on the deck chair at right angles to the bench.

"So two of our party have gone," he said; "we may say the two most important members of it," and he rustled the paper. "Hullo, the Kentucky shares down again," and a deadly earnestness overspread his face.

Presently he heaved a sigh, and offered the paper to Henry, who began to look it over.

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"Did you know Lady Cheriton before this?" he asked, smiling.

"No, I had not even seen her."

"She is still a beautiful woman."

"Why still?" said Henry, quickly.

"True, she is only thirty, but she has had a lot to try her, and I have known her for twelve years, so I say 'still,' after all that time, because I feel how I have aged myself."

"I suppose she has suffered a great deal?" said Henry, tentatively, and half unwilling to talk about her at all.

"She has had a great deal to put up with, but I don't think she feels things as some women do. She has always come up smiling, as it were, after any blow, and in her position there are compensations which she certainly does not undervalue."

"You don't like her?" said Henry, crudely.

"Like her! My dear Mr. Dacre, I admire her enormously; she is the cleverest woman I know. Astonishing! Her freshness and unworldliness, too! Look at these two days. I know how she has been amusing herself with you young people, as if she had not a care on her mind. And all the time she has been carrying on a rather difficult bit of diplomacy, and had Biddulph and me down here to defeat us on the spot. I suppose, like the rest of us, you thought she was going by the afternoon train, and so settled to stay till then."

"Yes, I did," said Dacre, with a frown.

"So did I," said Horace, "so the day to both of us is not quite what we intended. Come along and see Murdock's horses; I think we can get off by the three o'clock train."

CHAPTER VI

LADY ANNE VISITS HER SISTER

IT was past five o'clock on a mid-April afternoon, a few days before Lady Cheriton's visit to the Murdocks.

Lady Jane Haselton did not like waiting for tea: but to-day she was quite resigned, although she had cherished a secret longing for a cup of tea for at least an hour. The parlour-maid was rubbing up the silver inkstand and candlesticks, which Lady Jane had not given out for the spare room until after luncheon; and the housemaid was nailing up muslin blinds that had only been bought that morning.

"I wish the train were not so late," thought Lady Jane. "Anne ought to be here by now. I wonder, if I had asked Mrs. Murray, whether she would have baked some little cakes. It would have been nice to have had some little rice-cakes for tea. It was quite a false alarm about her giving warning this morning. I really do believe it would be good for her sometimes to bake things in the afternoon, and she might even enjoy it."

Soon wheels could be heard in the distance, and Lady Jane sat up eagerly, all worries lost in the thought of Anne. Lady Anne was the younger sister;—now, alas! the youngest, for a year ago they had, with aching hearts, carried Lady Mary across the park, under the old oaks, where they had played as children, to the family vault, to lay her beside her mother, Lord Massingham's first wife.

Jane had stayed some weeks in her old home with her

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sister, while her father and his wife were abroad. Since then she had not seen Anne; and now a feeling of faintness and a choking sensation in her throat prevented her from leaving her sofa. The fly drew up at the garden gate, and the housemaid at the opposite duplicate Queen Anne red-brick villa put her head out of the window, to see who the smart lady with the large trunks could be, who was arriving at "that Lady Jane's who never does have company." Then the bell rang, and the parlour-maid hurried to the door, and there was a moment's confusion, and Anne ran in before she could be announced.

The sisters kissed each other, and Jane shed a tear or two, and they felt supremely comforted and happy at being together; yet both knew, with a sudden pang, that in meeting they sorely needed Mary, and were very incomplete without her.

"I don't think you look so extraordinarily well," said Anne, looking hard at her sister.

"Oh, I'm a bit tired, but never mind; I shall be all right now that you've come. Oh, it *is* nice having you!"

The sisters devoured each other with their eyes. They had a strong family likeness in spite of much difference. Anne was tall, straight, and active, with blue eyes, firm mouth, and well-chiselled nose. The charm of the face lay in the straight, clear glance, the unconscious outlook which, while it was delicate, reserved, and spiritual, had so strong a sense of fellowship in meeting other human eyes. It was the look of one who had never been deeply disappointed, had never known what it is to be

" . . . misled, wronged, or distress,
And surely here it may be said
That such are blest."

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Jane, too, had in her darker, duller eyes the peace of the sheltered, but it was the negative rather than the positive quality of fearlessness. Altogether, in features and general contour, she was a less clearly cut, a dimmer and less beautiful woman than Anne.

Tea came after a short wait and nervous queries from Lady Jane as to what "they could be doing." And it was rich in surprises. Not only the unbidden rice-cakes, but delicious hot buttered toast had been provided in honour of the guest.

Anne poured out tea, and Jane ate more buttered toast than a far stronger woman could digest, saying that she had counted the cost and must enjoy herself.

"I heard from the step-dame this morning," she said presently, "a fair account of papa. I think they are having a real good time, sightseeing with some nice little toady people 'who quite take your father's views of the state of the Catholic Church in England.' "

"Let me see the letter."

"No, you can't; that's what's so funny. It's private; you see it is mostly about 'poor dear Anne.' "

"I wish she would stop worrying her conscience—it's all that sense of duty," and Anne's face clouded a little.

"This letter would really amuse you," said Jane, gently, "though of what good I can be I don't know."

"Then I know what it is," cried Anne. "According to her pet principles, they ought to give me a London season; and as she does not want to come home, she suggests that it would do quite well, instead, if you would provide a Catholic eldest son of high degree with a large fortune. Now, doesn't she say that 'a quiet homely way of meeting people really often does these things better than a season in London'; also that 'it is a well-known fact that no

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marrying men ever go to balls now'; that 'unless you are in a very smart Protestant set you never meet a marriageable Catholic man'; that the world has sadly altered; and, in short, that she knows things will be much better in your hands?"

"But," said Jane, seriously, "we see nobody at all here, and there are no men."

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, drop the man question, Jane; it drives me mad. But one should recognise the mercies of Providence, and I have escaped another season with Lady Massingham, in one of her moods of doing her duty to her husband's child exactly as if she were her own."

"Do you know," said Jane, pensively, "I do feel sorry now for the step-dame that she never had a baby. I often think how tiresome I was to her. You and"—hesitating—"Mary were much nicer."

"My old darling," said Anne, stretching out her hand for Jane's, "have you been repenting very much of all your imaginary sins this winter?"

"No, Roger won't let me. I sometimes think that I sha'n't know how to repent of my real every-day sins soon."

"That is one advantage of a husband, I admit," said Anne. "By the way, how is he?"

"Well, he says he is very well," said Jane, who was one of those women who can never be quite without anxiety for those they love, "but I think he seems a little tired in the evenings. I don't like the look of his eyes sometimes. I wonder," with a deep sigh, "if I have done right in encouraging him to smoke."

"Why shouldn't he, if he wants to?" said Anne.

"I don't know that he did want to, not so very much, only—" but now the door opened, and the dowager baby was pushed into the room by a very unformed nursery maid.

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Muriel was two and a half years old, and so round that she might have been drawn in circles, and from the stiff curls round her head to her very fat legs every curve at this moment expressed offended dignity. She stalked up to her mother, giving glances of defiance at Anne.

Mother and aunt were kissing her and laughing and did not hear a noise in the little hall, and Lady Jane gave a start of joy as her big husband hurried into the room, and, after hastily greeting Anne with enthusiasm, turned to kiss his wife.

"You look tired, darling; what have you been bothering about? How do you think she is, Anne?"

Captain Hazleton was a tall, finely built man who looked every inch a soldier, and not in the least as if he were in business in the City. His vitality was exuberant; his walk always seemed to be turning into a run, and he never went up-stairs without almost shaking the house down.

After a few minutes' talk with Anne, he put Muriel on his shoulder, and she disappeared in triumph with one fat hand lost in his curly hair.

This time he woke the baby; but the nurse, who was a smart, thin, modern woman, with a large fringe, only smiled a welcome as she set to work to hush it again, and a moment later he was spinning down the road on his bicycle, to get some exercise before dinner.

But the baby would not settle, so that the nurse could not bathe Muriel, who would not be touched by the nursery-maid, and Lady Jane, who had left her sister to unpack her box, and was lying down and saying her rosary, heard the noise and went up to put him to sleep. Lady Jane was not handy with a baby, and held it rather as Alice held the pig in *Wonderland*. She tried to make up for her lack of skill by zeal, and she walked up and down,

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"hushing" vigorously, made more nervous by the anxious looks of the nurse, who was decidedly cross with Muriel, for keeping her away from the "precious lamb," screaming itself hoarse in its mother's aching arms. At last Muriel was in bed, and Lady Jane gave up the baby in an apologetic manner, with a little pain at her heart, and no human nurse could have resisted saying, "Poor darling, the perspiration 's running down his neck."

So Lady Jane was late for dinner, and the soup, for which special stock had been bought the day before, was spoilt, and Roger criticised it before the parlour-maid, who was sure to repeat his remarks to the cook. But then she was able to tell Anne all her troubles, while Roger smoked his cigar. Before he joined them, Anne had heard and sympathised in a thousand things. She had learnt how quickly they had taken Belle Vue Hill Villa, otherwise No. 12 Hartington Place, because the suburb was such a particularly healthy one, and the agent told them that several other people were after the house, and that there was no time to lose; besides which it was so conveniently near the station for Roger. She had learnt how Roger had never arranged about the painting of the house, and how after all it was not nearly as near the Common as they had expected, and how terribly tired Jane had been over getting in, and how badly the ball cock in the top cistern had behaved from the first, and how she thought that City life was bad for Roger, but that the angel, and "he really is a born archangel, Anne," never blamed his father-in-law for making him leave the Army, and "what a terrible mistake it had been." Then there had been a succession of cooks, of course, and the perfectly charming housemaid who had outlived them all, and who sometimes actually took a scuttle of coals up to the nursery if the boot

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and knife boy were late (that was, of course, before the nursery-maid came), and there had been the parlour-maid, who had been as good as a butler, but who said she couldn't stay in a house where they gave no dinner-parties, and then the present parlour-maid, who "seemed" all right, except that she did not look after Roger's clothes properly.

And Anne was really keen to hear it all, and full of cheering views and suggestions, most of which showed, according to Jane, no due appreciation of the difficulties, but were morally supporting all the same.

When Anne went to the little room overlooking the tiny, square, badly kept garden at the back, the one sooty barked apple-tree, now glorious in white and pink blossom, seemed to shine in the dim light. She flung the window wide open, and leant out and inhaled a deep draught of spring air.

"' Master of life,' he cried, desponding
‘ Must our lives depend on these things ? ’ ”

It had been one of those quotations that had been common with Mary and herself. Who does not know what it is, for a quotation that we have specially shared with one who is dead, to rise unbidden, bringing back laughing lips and tender eyes, with a vividness that is searching pain? A line of poetry, an old joke, a word of slang held in common, may be the symbol of the union of hearts

" That words are powerless to express
And leave it still unsaid in part,
Or say it in too great excess.”

All through the winter months, which Anne had spent at home, in her unspoken sorrow, she had thought how sweet

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it would be to be with Jane, and how then they would talk of Mary. And how differently the evening had been spent ! She believed—and Anne believed very thoroughly in those she loved—that Jane's deeper heart was very full of Mary, and she saw, too, that her nerves were unstrung by illness and unaccustomed solitude. But still, the loss of Mary could not be the same to her sister as to herself. Jane had Roger and the babies, and Anne had only a part of Jane's heart and a fraction of her father's. Yet Jane, who was so rich, had such a knack of scraping off the gilt from the gingerbread of life !

CHAPTER VII

THE FACE IN THE CHURCH

ANNE, coming into the drawing-room at tea-time, a few days after her arrival, was surprised to find a visitor, but immediately recognised the new parish priest who was paying his first call on her sister. Jane had dropped the novel Anne had bought for her on the floor; and her shoe, also at a little distance, confirmed the impression that she had been taken by surprise, an impression not calculated to put the visitor at his ease.

He was a very fair, rather washed-out young man, who looked, as was probably the case, as if he had been underfed and overworked at the seminary.

Anne sat down and made ready to join in the rather spasmodic conversation. She observed that it was very hot for April.

“Not so hot as this time three years ago.”

Jane asked if there were any hope of getting the new church built before long.

“Not unless people bustle a little more about it.”

Anne asked if they had a good school.

“The ordinary sort of thing; holds about a hundred.”

Jane tried next.

“Wasn’t the schoolmistress a very nice woman?”

She spoke with more enthusiasm than realisation of the mistress’s personality.

“Good teacher; but does n’t get on with the parents.”

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A pause. Jane rang the bell to order tea.

"Have you been here long?" said Father Groves, suddenly, to Anne. He looked at her hard as he spoke, after the manner of some shy people.

She told him "a few days," and said what delightful air it was, a thing she had repeated often since she came, as she could not think of much else that was delightful in that most respectable suburb.

"It does not suit me as well as South London," he answered quickly, and his face brightened.

"Were you long in South London?"

"Five years at St. Ethelwald's," he answered, less abruptly than he had yet spoken. "I wish they had left me there."

"Did you like it?" asked Jane.

"I should think so," he answered; "there was something to do there. Five thousand Catholics in our parish and only two priests. Baptisms, marriages, giving the sacraments all day long and a good bit of the night. We've had five sick calls in one night; often sent for to men and women we had not even known to be Catholics, to hear their confessions and give them the last sacraments; hear the story of a man's whole life sometimes, give him holy communion, and go on to the next. Perhaps you would hear no more of him till you buried him. You couldn't, you see," he explained to Anne, who was listening intently, "go back to the same; you had to go on to the next. If you tried to keep in touch with Monday's cases, you couldn't get through Wednesday's."

"Was it not very hard work?" said Jane.

"I didn't feel it; there was such a lot of life. I think it will be much harder work down here, pottering on with the pious, respectable people."

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Jane and Anne laughed; clearly the ice was broken. But Anne was absorbed in what he had said.

"Five thousand Catholics in one parish?" she repeated.

"Oh, probably many more," said Father Groves, "that we knew nothing about."

"And were they frightfully poor?"

Father Groves laughed.

"Don't you know that South London has the darkest spots of Booth's *Darkest England*? Oh, it's too awful to speak of, though St. Ethelwald's parish is n't really as bad as Rotherhithe. Rotherhithe is impossible."

And Father Groves went on to speak with animation of his work in South London, of the appalling overcrowding of the huge Irish colony, of the semi-barbarous natures which the life produced, the occasional wonders of grace, the disappointments. The misery was too vast to be represented as a whole. The economic side was beyond the zealous priest's knowledge. But the field for work—for instance, among the class of dock labourers and lightermen—was immense;—for rescuing large numbers from practical animalism; for bringing comfort and peace to the dying, religion and self-respect to those whose course had yet to run.

Anne, giving him his tea and eating bread and butter, was lost in thought.

"I knew something of it, vaguely, I suppose," she said; "I wonder how far we are responsible for being vague about these things. Did you have much lay help?"

"A little, not very much; but I think the clergy are partly to blame for that. Henry Dacre came to work for us at times. Do you know Henry Dacre? He is a great friend of mine."

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There was a good deal of eagerness in the way he asked the question.

"No, I don't think I know the name. Do you, Anne?" Anne shook her head.

Father Groves looked at them in blank astonishment.

"Have you never read his poems? Why, *The Chronicle* said that they had caught the true Elizabethan spirit better than anything written in this reign."

The sisters were politely interested, but internally sceptical, as all educated persons should be with regard to a new poet.

"And he worked with you in South London?" said Anne, trying to return to the former topic: but it would n't do.

"Oh, yes," said Father Groves, "but you must read his poetry. You do care for poetry?" for a doubt struck him as to whether these two women, in spite of their intelligent eyes and well-formed foreheads, owed their ignorance of Henry Dacre to a general lack of culture.

"I hope so," said Anne, smiling, "and I should like to read your friend's poems. Are any of them about South London?"

"No, no," he answered, almost impatiently; "South London is n't Elizabethan, now, at least. No, Dacre's poetry is inspired by the love of ideal beauty, and of the eternal unity between truth and beauty. That is his interpretation of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* which are his own source of inspiration. But I put it so badly. May I send you the poems?" rising to go; "he gives me all he writes. He is coming down to stay with me some day this week. He may even turn up to-night."

He paused, rather as if he expected them to say that they would like to know this genius; but as they did not, he made his farewells and escaped.

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"They seem very nice," he said to himself, as he walked down the road, "and they might help to amuse Dacre if he stays on. Fancy never having heard of Henry Dacre!" and he laughed aloud, and had only just time to compose himself into a polite bow to the wife of one of his leading parishioners.

Roger found the sisters talking of the visit.

"Jane, I do wish you would practise keeping your shoes on; it really is——"

"I do try," said Jane, plaintively, "and, Anne, I am sure he did not see."

"Didn't see!" cried Anne, "when your shoe was straight in front of him! I think that was partly what made him so shy at first; it seemed a plain intimation that you did n't expect visitors. Happily, he has got a sense of humour. Do ask him to dinner. I want to know a lot more about South London, and I am sure Roger would like him."

"Yes, but he will have this Dacre man staying with him."

"He meant you to ask his poet to come and see you," said Anne.

"Roger," interrupted Jane, "have you ever heard of an Elizabethan poet called Henry Dacre, who is the glory of the Victorian era? I need n't ask him here, need I, just because he is going to stay with Father Groves? You see he is sure to be impossible, is n't he? I am sorry he is to be here just now, because I should like to see more of Father Groves."

"Oh, I dare say he won't stay long," Roger answered, "and then we can ask Father Groves; there is no hurry, and we shall lose our reading of *Pickwick* if he dines. By the way, did you remember the note-paper? I must write one or two letters before I go out."

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"Oh, Roger, I am sorry," said Jane, starting up in horror; "how can I have forgotten?"

Roger said nothing, and rose instantly to leave the room.

"Oh, dear," cried Jane, "is n't it the most extraordinary thing that when I would willingly go barefoot to the town and back rather than let him write his letters after dinner and get a headache, I can't remember such a simple thing: and we passed the shop this afternoon?"

Anne was silent, and her sister went on in a broken voice:

"You see, it is the sort of thing that is always happening, and if he had n't the temper of an angel— Do you think, Anne, that if he really lost his temper and swore at me, it would do any good?"

A few minutes later Anne was walking fast up the villa-skirted road until she turned down a narrow lane between brick walls, which was the short cut to the common. Her spirit had been greatly relieved since she had found this outlet from villadom, and now that she could feel that space and width of view and expanse of sky were at only a mile's distance, she was more friendly to the trim gardens, and could enjoy their faintly budding lilacs and brilliant wild-cherry blossoms, almost crudely pink against shower-washed blue skies.

The great park at Massingham and the rolling downs beyond had left their impress on Jane and Anne, who, in their brown holland pinafores and shaggy heads, had grown up almost as freely as the deer that grazed there.

"Oh, dear, oh, dear," Anne sometimes said to herself now, "I hope I sha'n't fall in love with a poor man, for if I do, I know I shall marry him, and I could n't live like Jane, even if I managed quite differently. I dare say I should do just as badly if I got ill and had to save every

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penny. Jane did n't seem half as forgetful and unpractical at home, but then everything was done for us at home. The fact is, we were abominably brought up, or rather we were brought up to be rich. Now, if we had been brought up to be poor, like Muriel Cheriton, we might have married men like Lord Cheriton, and rolled in wealth with broken hearts."

And then she would laugh to think how like her own thoughts were becoming to Jane's disjointed conversation.

"And Jane says she is the happiest woman in the world, in spite of the poverty, and the little furnished house, and the whole thing. And I dare say it 's true; only if so, there is n't much to be said for the world at its best, that 's all, if you worry yourself into fiddle-strings all the time."

This evening her thoughts were turned elsewhere. She had been suffering for some time from a sense of emptiness in her own life,—not an easy trial to bear. How much pity and sympathy had been showered upon her by a small circle of relations and friends, while she was nursing the beautiful Lady Mary, who had faded very gradually into consumption ! But then, in spite of aching care and anxiety, in spite of the sense of loss and parting, what ideal hours of union, of peace, of nearness to the spiritual!

"The Orient from on high hath visited us, to enlighten them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to direct our feet in the way of peace."

Anne had been in those years singularly without the little frets and jars and the sense of smallness that especially worried her in ordinary life. There had been an escape from many things that seemed to her vulgar and dull in the world when she first came out. She and Mary had felt worried, and their pride had been a little hurt at Lady Massingham's attitude towards marriageable step-daughters. They were

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several years younger than Jane, who had persuaded her father not to think London necessary, and who had ended by marrying a penniless soldier of good family. It was not what her step-mother considered a creditable marriage in any way, and she had been determined that the younger sisters should do better.

Mary's illness had proved for Anne a retreat from a somewhat uncongenial world, and then had followed a sacred time of mourning. Now that was closing, and the old worries were reviving with a new loneliness and without Mary to share them.

It was in this sense of dissatisfaction with her present life that Father Groves had unwittingly lit a spark, not so much by any words spoken, as by the infection of a strong enthusiasm unsuccessfully concealed. To work in South London,—might not that be what she was meant to do? To go to the very worst state of things in a fallen world, and help just a little bit to bring light into that darkness!

She stood on the top of a fir-crowned hillock out on the Common, gazing with little consciousness at the great view spread out before her. It seemed but as an accompaniment of music to the passion of pity and longing rising in her soul. Then she roused herself, and remembered that there was another spot where these thoughts should be crowned, if they were indeed acceptable. She had not paid a visit to the church that day, and it was getting late.

She walked very fast, and found that she had ten minutes to spare in the ugly little church near the station. It had been built by a French *émigré* abbé at the opening of the century, when the suburb it now stood in had been a quiet country village. It would soon have to be pulled down to make way for a new church.

Anne found it empty and nearly dark. She knelt in one

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of the stiff, narrow benches, and buried her face in her hands. She had meant to pray that all obstacles, all objections on her father's part to her working in South London might be overcome; but in the first moments of recollecting the Presence in which she was kneeling, her thoughts turned differently, and she humbly made an offering of the coming years, that she might be ready to do and bear in them whatever was for the greater glory of her Lord. And the peace for which He has borne the chastisement seemed to rest visibly on her upturned face.

Two men were moving in the sacristy and talking in a low voice. Father Groves opened the door and shut it again. Anne had a vague impression that she had seen him, and a tall dark man behind him.

"There is somebody there now," said Father Groves; "I will show you the tomb of M. l'Abbé when the church is empty."

"But who is that beautiful woman?" asked Henry Dacre.

"Lady Anne Massingham, sister to Lady Jane, whom I spoke of just now," was the answer.

When Anne got back to Belle Vue, she found the family in the happiest state of mind. The calamity of Roger having to write his letters after dinner had been avoided by putting off the meal, regardless of the feelings of the small but pampered household, until half-past eight. Jane's voice calling from the nursery informed Anne of the change. Anne ran up-stairs and found her sister flushed to a pretty rose colour with the exertion and pleasure

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of bathing Muriel. The child had just been lifted out of the bath on to her mother's knee. The evening glow was fading in warm tints, and in the dimness the little white figure shone as with a light of its own.

"Oh, how delicious," cried Anne, putting her arm round the damp, soft, rounded, firm, little person, and burying her face in the fat neck till the child rippled with laughter and tried to catch at her hair.

"I wanted to tell you," said Jane, "that I have had a letter from Muriel Cheriton, asking us all to stay at Cobden."

"What a good idea," said Anne; "it is just the change you want."

"Yes, I know," sighed Jane, "but you know the nurseries at Cobden *do* look north, and I'm not at all certain of the drains."

"Oh, my dear Jane, what nonsense!"

"Well," said Jane, apologetically, "don't tell Roger that I said that. Oh, and I meant to tell you, Muriel has been staying at the same house with Father Groves's hero, Mr. Dacre, and says that he is quite charming, and she wants us to know him."

"How amusing!" cried Anne; "and you said he was sure to be impossible."

"I know I did," said Jane. "I suppose it was the spirit of contradiction."

CHAPTER VIII

IN THE EXILE'S GARDEN

“**I**HARDLY know why this place charms me as it does,” said Henry Dacre, as he strolled about the little paths of Father Groves’s garden; “the old wall and those creepers, the elm inside and the fir-trees beyond—why have they such an atmosphere? It must be that your *émigré* was a remarkable man. A pathetic and dignified sense of exile has left its stamp on church, house, and garden. And is not the sense of exile peculiarly Christian?”

“Yes, that it is,” cried Father Groves, eagerly. “Oh, could n’t you make a poem on that idea?”

Dacre shook his head, took his friend’s arm, and went on: “It is peculiarly spiritual, and think how much stronger must have been the sense of exile in his day. *Now* the material differences between our country and his are going fast. *Then* he may have felt that nothing was alike except a few flowers, and they so differently scented, and the stars at night, and they so often hidden here by mists and fog. Everything he saw, touched, tasted, would make him feel that he was a pilgrim in a strange land.”

Dacre’s face was raised towards the fir-trees and the light where the sun had been a few moments before. The same glow that lit up his dark eyes made the shallow, delicate face of his admirer shine as he looked up at him. Then Father Groves gave a sharp little sigh.

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"I must go in and finish my office," he said regretfully; but he went in with the boyish smile of a hero-worshipper, to say his office in the little church. There is a special influence in the admiration of a good friend on a nature at all honest, and Henry could not see Father Groves's eyes kindle in looking at him without realising how different he was from what his friend dreamed him to be.

He and Father Groves had once passed together through the acute stages of spiritual development, which seem, like every other phase in earnest youth, to spring at heights, to bound over the mountains of human difficulty, and to make men, like the sons of the morning, full of light and glow.

Father Groves was disappointed when Dacre gave up the priesthood; but he believed, nevertheless, that his gifted friend was to do great things for God in the world so full of drama, beauty, and colour, on which he himself had turned his back. Therefore when Henry came to see him from time to time, with fresh instances of success in literature and plans for the future, he found the companion of his youth eagerly drinking in his views, gaining in his friend's career an outlet for his own sacrificed ambitions.

On the other hand, Father Groves kept before Henry the picture of himself as he had been some four or five years before; but in those years Henry had learned more of the perspective of life than his friend suspected, and while to Lady Cheriton he seemed delightfully fresh, and almost unpleasantly so to Colquhoun, he was a cynical man of the world compared to the young priest. Nevertheless, he had not himself perceived until this evening that the diversity of their ideals was growing very marked.

This was Henry's first visit to his friend in the old Abbé's house, and his flexible imagination had caught on to his

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surroundings—he was extremely susceptible to novelty of scene. The quaint, low rooms, the shelves from floor to ceiling filled with old patristic volumes and early editions of Bossuet, Fénelon, and Massillon, some old French devotional engravings, and, above all, the little neglected sweet-smelling garden, had suddenly brought the spirit of romance back to its former channels. To-night he dreamed not of Parliamentary life, not of satisfying Lady Cheriton, not of literary success; but with a heartache such as comes to a man in the midstream of life, if he goes back to the scenes of early childhood, Henry dreamed again of a life of sacrifice, of union, of peace. But when he awoke, such thoughts brought to him that same sense of being a spectator, not an actor, which comes so vividly to the middle-aged man watching the boys in his own old home. “There it is—see how it still goes on—but I cannot go back to it now.”

And yet, Henry told himself that he could not renounce these ideals, or regard them as a thing of the past, or as unconnected with his own life; that whatever his career, they *did* represent life as a whole and its worth.

“I wonder if it would do me any good to go into exile,” he mused, as he lit a cigar, and turned again on the narrow, overgrown grass path. “Only I should always be able to come back again. If one could not be always doing what one likes one might come to some good.

“‘ Me this unchartered freedom tires,
I feel the weight of chance desires.’

I wonder if a fellow like Groves knows what a weight they are sometimes?”

His thoughts presently wandered from this mood of introspection, and he began to smile over some little joke

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that had passed when he left the Murdocks but a few hours before.

Instantly Lady Cheriton came back to his mind.

With his priest friend, in this spare but beautiful little enclosure, in the pure light of the spring evening, he was glad to feel, as he thought of her, a growing reaction against the influence that had held him during the past few days. He felt annoyed at himself for having been so easily fascinated, for having shown the secret and sacred places in his soul so unreservedly to Lady Cheriton.

A calm came over his excitement, and he acknowledged it with a sense of relief. The thrill of certain moments when reading aloud, when hearing her speak, when rendering the homage of his eyes to hers—had it not been foolish, and below what was best in him, thus hungrily to gather the crumbs cast him by this woman of the world? What right had she to look at him like that? He felt angry, then breathed a low sigh of pleasure, then checked himself sharply. He felt sure now that this great air of friendship had had no meaning; it was only a way of passing time in the country—the trick, the mannerism of a beauty and a great lady, who thought the light from those orbs could only be beneficent. Was it part of the education of her society to grow accustomed to these things, to smile hardly back again, and go on lightly to the next person, thing, impression, sensation in the kaleidoscope of life, until, worn out and jaded, you pronounced the whole thing a sham? He, Dacre, would not live like that; whatever came, he would keep his manhood and its realities and its happiness.

Good God, how heartsick he had seen her look at moments! What a strange, icy, hard look had come over her face once or twice, as if the amiability were a mere mask! Could a woman who acted so skilfully be in any of her

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converse quite sincere? Colquhoun, who had been very friendly, had hinted *not*, and yet Mr. Biddulph, whom Henry liked infinitely better, believed in her so thoroughly. Was it only because he, too, felt the subtle commanding fascination?

What else had Horace Colquhoun hinted unpleasantly about Lady Cheriton to Henry Dacre? Something that made him protest against slander, and query angrily in his own mind, as he stood silent and frowning in an angle of the old wall, and looked with eyes that did not see at the ground in front of him. Then he gave a start of impatience, and made a few quick paces forward.

"Oh, what does it matter what she is really! It is of no use bothering over it; let me leave it alone. I don't truly trust or like her."

And then something caught his breath painfully.

"Suppose I never see her again. Could I be the same as if we had not met? Is she not now more to me than she ought to be? How has it come about, and ought I to resist it?"

Then gently there seemed to rise in the dusk of the walled garden, where the Abbé had walked and prayed for all those in suffering, sin, or temptation, a face that Dacre had seen that evening — young, simple, but most exquisite, with eyes fixed on the tabernacle. Those eyes, too, betrayed the yearning of the exile, that seemed to exhale from the very flowers of the garden. And the girl's face calmed the angry trouble of his mind with the infection of a divine peace.

CHAPTER IX

IN LONDON

WHEN Henry Dacre left Father Groves, and went back to his bachelor rooms in London, his musings in the Abbé's garden seemed unreal enough to be easily suited to a poem, had he had a mind at leisure to write one. He said to himself that it had been a fit of the imagination, the sham fight of a day-dream, and had held no true history of temptation or of ideal. Lady Cheriton was an opportune friend, and really he needed somebody of the kind, and it would be impertinent to her, and morbid in himself, to hesitate to take advantage of her kindness; while as to the face seen in the dim light of the sanctuary lamp, that was certainly clear and radiant enough to inspire a poem, and should do so one of these days when there was leisure.

At present he was very busy. There was little professional work in prospect; but he had two important books to review for a weekly paper, and he had heard from the editor of the *Nineteenth Century* that his article on *Christian Socialism* would not pass unchallenged. Press cuttings, typewritten copies of MSS., law business, and many other things made a formidable pile on his writing table. But on the top, his clerk had placed several letters of a different kind. He took up the first, and, opening it, saw to his surprise that it was from Cheriton Abbey.

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DEAR MR. DACRE:

I want to tell you that yesterday I met Lord Newfold and Sir John Rusk. I have asked them to use their influence to ensure your being among the members specially selected by the Committee of the Junior Carlton for election this year. That ought to be enough to secure your election and you should not, I think, move further in the matter. One or two friends of mine are giving some tiresome parties. You ought to go to them. Ambition must be of stuff stern enough to endure being bored, even very much bored. It is the old problem of the game and the candle. But take the advice of one much older, a long five or six years older than you are. If you will play the game, make sure you choose the right candle.

Yours truly,

MURIEL CHERITON.

Then, below that, lay three invitations for evening, and two for dinner-parties, all of them, except one of the dinners, at houses where he had never been before.

He sat back in his chair, a little startled, feeling that he was, without his own concurrence, in a stream of life that was new to him. He had not been prepared for such surprising activity, and he was not sure what he thought about it. Did he like it or not, this being floated into the London world on a wave of Cheriton patronage? And yet he did not think of refusing; it did not occur to him to doubt whether to obey orders. Also, had he even debated it, he would have known that to refuse these things was a more marked step down the hill of one sort of progress, than to accept them was to go up. Once the powers decided to launch him in their own way, he must go on, or not go at all. A card of Horace Colquhoun's, with a scribbled line, "Shall we meet at the 'F. O.' to-night?" seemed to indicate that Colquhoun, too, had received orders to assist in this process of launching.

And when he got to the Foreign Office, and was slowly, inch by inch, mounting the stairs, occasionally exchanging

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a few words on that hill of difficulty with a “Q.C.” whom he knew slightly, he was convinced from the look in Colquhoun’s face, as he let his eyeglass fall from under the wrinkled eyelid, while he gazed on the crowd from the vantage-ground of the landing, that Horace had been told to watch for him. Colquhoun spoke a few words to a tall, fair, large woman with heavy features and heavily set diamonds, by his side, and a little later Dacre found himself presented to Lady Berringfield, who told him, almost crudely he thought, that she knew he was a friend of Lady Cheriton’s. Nor after she had left him with the expressed hope that he was coming to her party next week did the ministering spirit of Colquhoun desert him. This time it was to a man, small, shrewd-faced, loud in voice, telling stories, and burying their point in his own laughter, that he was introduced. Dacre recognised the name as that of one of Lady Cheriton’s acquaintances who had promised to get him into the Junior Carlton.

“It is a useful club,” said Sir John Rusk, “especially for entertaining your friends; and a young man can get to know plenty of good Tory wire-pullers there if he likes. But,” he exclaimed suddenly, “what do I see before me? Biddulph!—what dissipation! And now,” he said audibly to Colquhoun, “we shall see the women making for him till he turns as cross as— But why has he come? The only attraction is not yet in London.”

Mr. Biddulph, with clouded brow and palpable efforts at good temper, was tunnelling his way, through exclaiming and welcoming friends, to where they stood.

Then it flashed on Dacre that he, too, had had his orders.

“Why were n’t you at Cheriton to help her to open the new wing?” said the sharp voice of the little man to Biddulph. “We went over from Dartley.”

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"I had one or two things to do at the 'C. O.,'" was the reply; "I can't play with time as if I were a mere Cabinet Minister. What have you great men been plotting down there?"

"Things against your peace. Newfold has orders to get your secretary, Whitehead, some extremely comfortable and lucrative appointment without delay."

Sir John Rusk laughed at this piece of information, as if the joke were too delightful, and turned to speak to a lady near him before more could be got from him. Colquhoun, too, had turned aside, but he came back for a moment.

"Lunch with me at the Bachelors', on Saturday, two o'clock," he said to Henry.

"All right."

Mr. Biddulph looked at Dacre with an expression of responsibility and perplexity as they were left.

"I was told to look out for you," he said. "Now what ought we to do?"

Henry Dacre caught the look in his eye, with an expression of amusement, and then they both laughed.

"Come along," Mr. Biddulph said suddenly, "there's old Lady Crock quite alone, and she is nearly blind. I will introduce you to her. She is very poor and lonely, and it is a kindness to look her up."

So Lady Crock mumbled at him for some minutes, and Mr. Biddulph divined that she wanted some supper, and prepared for the herculean task of making her reach it, impeded as he was by the crowd and by the protests of more than one lady who wished to speak to him. Dacre felt the comic side of attempting to follow them. He saw Mr. Biddulph had forgotten him, so he made his way through the room and out of it all. He saw tired women

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leaning against any available door or pillar, and heard a shrill voice call his name. It was Lady Berringfield.

"Could you," she said, "establish any means of communication between me and my footman?"

This was nearly half an hour's task, but at last he got home. On his table was another note from Lady Cheriton:

DEAR MR. DACRE :

I am wondering whether you would like to be private secretary to Mr. Biddulph? I believe he will soon want one. It might interfere for some time with your work at the Bar, but on the other hand it would be an excellent political opening. Think well on it, and as soon as you feel clear go and see Mr. Biddulph.

Yours truly,

MURIEL CHERITON.

CHAPTER X

MR. BIDDULPH GIVES ADVICE

"CAN'T attend to you just yet"; then a little less gruffly: "Sit down, the papers are there somewhere."

It was in the downstairs sitting-room of Mr. Biddulph's house, looking out on a few square yards of paving-stones across to a high, begrimed brick wall, surmounted by a decoration of broken glass. The speaker was Mr. Biddulph, and he did not speak again for some time, though he emitted audible sighs and grunts as his pen scratched onward. He leant over the table with large rounded shoulders into which the rough, grizzled black head seemed to sink as if no neck separated it from them, while, with small, dim eyes, he wrote with effort an almost undecipherable hand.

Henry Dacre, looking blankly out of the window, felt chilled. He had had no anxiety as to his reception. After a good deal of hesitation on his own part he had come. It was in reality a foregone conclusion that he should come. But if he was not wanted? If Mr. Biddulph was unwilling to have him for a private secretary he would much rather have stayed away.

At last, after nearly twenty minutes of scratching, and the other intermittent sounds, Mr. Biddulph touched a bell on the table, and a servant appeared. His master handed

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him a large blue envelope without speaking, and then turned slightly towards Dacre.

"I can't face the light," he said, "will you come over here?" and he rose and took his seat in a deep, much-worn armchair, and Dacre sat down opposite to him. Was it partly that he might see him better? The short-sighted surprise us sometimes by what they see in our faces.

They were a strong contrast; the unwieldy, bulky form in untidy, ink-stained clothes, and collar of uncertain form, shaggy beard and rough hair, with dim eyes almost lost under heavy brows; and the young man, very well dressed, very well groomed, with no spare flesh beyond what was needed to soften the outline of bone and muscle, large eyes, full of light, and an almost arrogant vitality in the carriage of the head.

"And you want to be *my* secretary," thought Biddulph, with a touch of humour. "And if you do well, nay, very well, you may some day be as successful as I am," and he muttered a line from his beloved poet:

"'T is all perhaps which man acquires,
But 't is not what our youth desires.'"

"Well?" he said aloud, at length, and a little gruffly still.

"Lady Cheriton told me to come."

There was no pique in Henry's tone, only still the same suggestion of a sense of humour, which they had shared at the Foreign Office evening party.

"I know, I know," said Biddulph, and then, sitting forward a little, with an emphatic gesture of his large hand, and in his voice an earnestness that explained much of his personal influence, he said: "I cannot see your way in it at all."

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Dacre said: "But if *I* do?"

Biddulph again did not answer for a moment.

"I am not sure that you can judge of it at all adequately. Lady Cheriton judges of it from one point of view—which is, strictly speaking, a social one. She wishes to give what she conceives to be your talents the opportunity of being backed by all the influence that she understands and possibly overrates. You sacrifice the possibility of success in your own profession to make a stepping-stone of my drudgery. What I should say to you is—stick to your own work, be patient and wide awake, and you will get your opportunity. You will rise at the Bar, and twenty-five years hence you will have conquered your own position, and you can then go into Parliament and have a political career. It wants more faith to do this, but it is less worldly as a moral life, and you will get the best of the world in the long run."

Dacre did not feel in the least now as if Biddulph did not want him, and that was a relief. He did not speak, and the other went on, as if talking to himself:

"I've told her often what I think of it all. But it's of no use. It's ingrained in the ways of her world. From time to time they get excited over some man whom they think of extraordinary promise, and they run him as if he were a favourite horse. They will take," he said, looking at Dacre as if he were the audience for a lecture on the habits of some strange race,—"they will take infinite pains, write floods of nonsense to each other about him, get him all the sorts of things that can be got by teasing, and then —puff!—generally when he marries or grows fat they forget him. If he is lucky, he has meanwhile got himself some permanent post, even if it is only the care of the flowers in Hyde Park, and can live discontentedly with a discontented wife, on the fringe of the world those women hurried him

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into, and they will ask each other in quiet moments in the autumn if they know how he gets on, and if they remember how wonderfully good-looking he was."

Biddulph's twinkling eye met Dacre's, and they both laughed heartily.

"I have thought it over very seriously," said Dacre, a moment later, "and I am ready for the risk. I can't wait twenty years; life is too uncertain. I want to do many things. I am quite ready for the risk."

The repeated words fell on Biddulph's ears with the rhythm of some internal harmony. He felt as if his duty as devil's advocate were accomplished.

"There are no rules for genius," he said to himself, and curiously enough he did not ask himself why he accepted this genius as a fact. Not long afterwards, he reflected that they seemed all to have taken for granted that this young man had a great future.

"Well," he said, smiling, "if you definitely refuse to be Lord Chancellor we must do our best. But, good Lord, have you the faintest conception of this drudgery?" and he glanced at the endless piles of papers in their perfect order in the otherwise neglected room. "No, stay," he said, correcting himself, "not so fast. The devil's advocate has not finished. There is another aspect to the question."

He hesitated, and, to Dacre's surprise, looked shy, and the colour rose on his wide forehead.

"If you don't mind my doing it, I should like to say one thing more. Have you prayed about this?"

Dacre was silent, and Biddulph went on:

"Your religion has the undoubted advantage of presenting a plan of life, and guides. You don't need the advice of one like myself. You are happier. But perhaps I know

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better than a priest would the thickening effect of this London society, and of a career in any way depending on it. Even supposing you were to be a Dizzy,—mind it is not impossible; a Catholic now is no more handicapped than a Jew was then,—would it in your individual case be possible to do all this without dimming the light without which we are all in darkness?"

Dacre heard the voice tremble, and was immensely touched. Surely to work with this man would be the greatest safeguard. But he did not speak.

"This is what you would call a question of vocation," continued Biddulph, half to himself. "And if you are right to do it you will be helped to do it rightly."

Dacre rose and stood by him.

"I am more obliged to you than I can say. I think it is all right, but if you advise, I will think it over again and write to-night."

Biddulph pulled himself out of his chair, and shook hands with him very heartily.

"Just in time for lunch with Colquhoun," thought Dacre, and the afternoon slipped by in that gentleman's company.

Then letters to write, dinner with some friends in South Kensington, then to Lady Berringfield's party. She was as kind as her daughters were charming, and she presented him to a Cabinet Minister, a bishop, and an actress. After this he went home to bed and to sleep.

Such were his opportunities of reflection; and next morning he wrote a grateful note, accepting the post of private secretary to Mr. Biddulph.

He soon heard that he would enter on his duties directly after Whitsuntide.

CHAPTER XI

LADY JANE IS ABSURDLY ANXIOUS

JANE and Anne had never made any long stay at Cobden Park. For very many years it had been used only for garden parties and Saturday to Monday visits from London. Little strain had been put on the Adams furniture, beyond the slow, steady endurance of endless cleaning and polishing. All the rooms had a lingering dignity, as if long emptiness had made them independent of present inhabitants. They were peopled by the undisturbed shades of earlier generations, whose ladies might observe with satisfaction how mellowly their embroidered chairs and screens had faded, and how regularly the *pot pourri* was renewed in their priceless bowls, while their miniatures had not given place to the photographs of the moderns, which they so rightly despised.

Even when Lady Cheriton entertained at Cobden in June or July, unless it were a very wet day the guests spent their time out of doors, and only sauntered through the long gallery on one side of the large low hall with its marble pillars, or took each other to look at the treasures in the suite of small rooms opening into the garden on the south side. There was much to see, from the Romney, which dwelt in the little blue room with its solid silver grate and fire-irons, to the red bedroom where Sir Peter Lely had left ladies of singularly candid conceit to contemplate a carnation held in one white stiff hand, or to look supercil-

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iously at the silk embroidery on the matchless old quilt on the heavy four-post bed.

Little Muriel was an innovation indeed, but could not have been a shock to the shades of Cobden, for childhood they had always had with them. One dignified dame seemed to look at another and say: "A child at last, but evidently only a connection. When will the graceful boys that we had in silken knickerbockers and hose be repeated? Where is the heir of the Cheritons?"

Lady Jane, lounging back as those dames had never done, in a low garden chair, in the deep shade of a great cedar, was thinking very seriously. There was a faint difference between Lady Jane at Cobden and Lady Jane at Belle Vue Villa, difficult to define. Perhaps, to put it crudely, she was like a duck back in the water again, when she found herself in a beautiful house and grounds, with no housekeeping cares, and nothing to produce the sense of failure that weighed upon her at home, when she was doing unsuccessfully so many little homely tasks that seemed to come easily to other people.

Jane's garden hat and white muslin suited her, and a little colour had come into her cheeks. Lately, she had looked as if the still brightness of the exquisite lawn before the cedars, and the glow of the early roses growing in undefined nooks and corners, had passed into her face. But this evening there was a cloud of a different kind from the domestic species; and she was buried in thought when, looking up, a cry of joy broke from her, and she hurried across the lawn. Roger had been away to visit his mother, and a week's absence was a serious event to be closed with rejoicing.

At first they were absorbed in each other, and then Roger said:

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"Where is Anne?"

Jane's face clouded a little.

"She and Mr. Dacre are reading somewhere in the wood."

"I saw from your letters that you are coming round to what you snubbed me for saying almost at their first meeting. I think you said that I had a low military view of any man and girl liking each other."

Jane did not laugh.

"I don't know what to think," she said, gravely, leaning back in her chair.

"I can't think why you are so surprised," said Roger.
"It seems so very natural."

"I'm not surprised, only bothered," and Jane wrinkled her forehead more deeply than usual, and sighed.

"Is it because you don't think him rich enough?"

"No," came very slowly from Jane. "With Anne's money and his talents, it would be all right. No, it's not that."

"But you do like him," said Roger, watching his wife with affectionate amusement, "or you would not ask him here so often."

"I have n't exactly asked him," said Jane, helplessly, "but he has come, and keeps coming."

She spoke rather as if she were complaining of the constant coming of spring showers, over which she had no sort of control.

"Every day but one,—no, that's an exaggeration,—every day but two, while you have been away, he has been here. There generally seems to be a reason, something about South London and Anne's house there."

"You don't mean to say that she has taken a house already?"

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"No, but they have chosen a house. They went down there and met Miss Brownson, who works there, and is very anxious to have a settlement, and they chose a house, and they have made out about the taxes and drains, and all that sort of thing. If papa allows it, Anne and Miss Brownson will go into it next October."

"Is it all about South London?" asked Roger.

"No, he comes about South London, and he stays and reads to us. Then, if I have to go and see after baby, he goes on reading to Anne. Anne says that he is making her understand Cardinal Newman for the first time, and she has only known Mr. Dacre for three weeks."

"Oh, then it is all right," said Roger. "You know even I managed to read aloud to you before we were engaged, but I certainly never arranged for you to live with a Miss Brownson."

"No," said Jane, with a sigh half suppressed.

How difficult it is sometimes to speak even to a husband, and even when that husband is such a perfect specimen as Roger!

"Modern people get intimate in that sort of way very easily," she said at length.

"I don't see why you should be worried," said Roger, half impatiently, for it seemed as if Jane could never be without a magnified worry. "If they do like each other, it is all right; he is of a good family and likely to get on in life. He seems to be a perfect Providence, for Anne is hard to please, much harder than you were."

"Darling," said Jane, indignantly.

"Well, it is no use protesting; in the matter of my nose for instance you were not exacting. Now, this youth—but hang it, here's a visitor. I'll slope."

The footman advancing from the house told Jane that Mr. Biddulph was in the drawing-room.

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"Oh, if it is Biddulph, I'll go and fetch him," said Roger. "Order fresh tea, Jane," and he strode across the grass.

Mr. Biddulph had not been long established between the couple before he asked for Anne.

"She and Mr. Dacre are reading somewhere," said Roger, easily, but Jane had a look so solemn and charged with meaning that Biddulph made a mental note of the situation.

"He is a capital fellow," he said; "so keen and full of life. I don't know any young man at this moment of whom one might expect more."

"Do you really think so?" cried Jane; "but of course you would n't say it if you did n't. But you do like him and quite trust him, too, don't you?"

Her dark eyes, made darker by the lines of ill-health about them, touched Mr. Biddulph's tender sympathies.

"I have only known him for a few weeks certainly," he answered very gravely, "but I do like him and I think I trust him, though I know how young and unformed he is. The ease with which he falls in with new ways and new people is greatly because of this. But, Lady Jane," smiling as he put his fourth lump of sugar in his tea, "there is a venture in all trust, and when there is a fair cause for trust, we must venture those we love even as we have ventured ourselves."

Jane's eyes glistened.

"Thank you," she said, and then in nervous haste: "I dare say there is nothing in this; we may be quite wrong." And appealing to him with questioning still in her eyes: "Looking on at love, I suppose, is the most difficult thing; it is like watching dancing through a glass door."

"You are altogether too anxious-minded," said Biddulph, kindly.

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"I know," said Jane, "and that is depressing for Roger."

"And then you get more depressed because of depressing him, and so that makes him worse, which makes you worse, and so on, *ad infinitum*."

"Until it is a marvel," said Jane, laughing, "that after all we are so astonishingly happy."

"Still it is a mistake," said Biddulph, smiling back again; "I can't make out why happy people's hearts don't get too big for little things to worry them."

"I think it is plain enough; the big sorrows swallow up the little things, but the little things are so much more to the happy people—like the crumbs in a comfortable bed, you can't forget them. But you know you have wandered from the point; worrying about little things is quite different from being anxious about the people one loves. Happiness must make you anxious-minded, for if you have great and precious things to lose, you must feel terribly frightened about them."

"Yes," said Biddulph, in a low voice, "and when once they are safe with God, whatever else we feel, it is not anxiety."

Jane was silent with the silence of understanding, for she knew he was thinking of his wife.

After a moment, a slight noise on the gravel made them look round and see Anne, followed by Henry Dacre, coming towards them. Jane had a momentary impression of something being wrong, before Anne had smilingly greeted Mr. Biddulph.

"And Lady Cheriton is not coming to London yet," he said presently.

"So I shall miss her," said Jane, "as we are going abroad early in June to please a tiresome London doctor who wants to separate me from my children."

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"Because you worry so much," said Mr. Biddulph.

"I suppose so, though I think the allusion is mean."

"Are you going with her?" he asked Anne, who was standing by the table helping herself to tea.

"No, I am going to stay with Muriel Cheriton and be dissipated."

Jane, who was on the alert to a morbid degree, was watching Henry Dacre. He looked up suddenly, spilling a little cream into his saucer.

"Are you?" he cried eagerly; "when is that to be?"

"I don't quite know," said Anne, a little stiffly, turning from him towards Mr. Biddulph.

"When is Lady Cheriton coming up?" he asked Jane, in the same quick way.

"She is rather vague about her dates," said Jane. "If she is not up before we go, Anne must join her at Cheriton."

Dacre was silent. Jane thought he was listening to the other two, but she owned to herself that she was in that exasperating state of mind, which most people know at times, when the least word or gesture seems fraught with hidden meaning. She would have given much to penetrate into the mind behind the well-formed head and deep, dark eyes. They worried her now with a kind of negation, an absence of response in their very excellence, like the negative qualities of a Greek statue, that presents Manhood and Youth with capital letters rather than one suffering or rejoicing fellow creature.

Did Anne feel this in him too?

Anne was sitting in a low chair, talking eagerly to Mr. Biddulph, her voice a little louder than usual and her face a little paler.

"It's all very well," he said, "but how many of you really understand Newman? It aggravates me to hear you

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people boasting of him without understanding what he said."

"We may not understand," said Henry, his eyes lighting up, and the irregularity of nervous movement breaking the artistic effect of the face, "but many of us are talking Newman without knowing how far he may take us."

"Yes," said Anne, "he has revealed our thoughts to ourselves, though we can't grasp his."

Dacre gave her one quick glance of admiration, but she did not look his way.

"I am in a path in a strange land, beset with dangerous natives," said Biddulph, looking from Anne to Henry, "but yet I maintain that many of your people—you Catholics I mean—don't understand Newman and would be more afraid of him if they did."

"Any living organism shrinks from analysis," said Henry; "it is like vivisection."

Mr. Biddulph threw back his head and laughed.

"That is an ingenious explanation of the dislike ecclesiastical authorities have of being reminded of the rights of the *Ecclesia discens*."

"It is not ecclesiastical authorities, as such," said Henry, "but the men of practical minds who shrink from theories as to the constitution of Church or State. Don't you know how certain English officials connected—shall we say—with the Treasury, are bothered at any analysis of its workings, however true? They feel the sufferings of vivisection, and so the conventional theologian, even more than the ecclesiastical superior, shrinks from being analysed and located to his proper position in church history."

"I wonder," said Biddulph, with a twinkle, "how Newman would have analysed and located you and Lady Anne."

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"Oh, he would have been dreadfully bored by us," answered Henry, quite unconscious of the double meaning, "and he would have snubbed us well if we had given him the chance."

Biddulph had risen as he spoke, and they walked with him towards the house, Henry and Lady Anne falling behind the others as they went. Anne's face was bright again, and as her laugh and Henry's eager tones followed them, Biddulph smiled encouragement at Lady Jane. As usual, when he perceived anything, his mind jumped rapidly to a conclusion. Jane shrank slightly from the broad, simple confidence as to her sister's friendship with Dacre, but she felt the warmth of the kindness, blunder though it might.

After that day, Jane spoke no more on the subject, even to Roger, and Mr. Biddulph was too busy to come down again, his evenings being devoted to an old friend who was ill. But Henry Dacre came and went with the ease and unconsciousness of a friend who had known them from childhood, or who had some work in common with them to be carried out. It could hardly be the plans for South London, for it was agreed that no more could be done until Lord Massingham came home. Was it perhaps the study of Newman, or did she want to read the proofs of the rejoinder, which the editor of *The Nineteenth Century*, with his known appreciation of coming talent, had permitted Henry to give to his opponent in political economy? Whatever it was, Henry came, and manifestly enjoyed himself, whereas Jane saw a little cloud growing on Anne's brow, till it overshadowed the blue eyes and betrayed its influence in her manner. It could not be seen while the visitor was present, but it seemed to come especially just after he had left, which was usually during the children's hour. It

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was new for Anne to be irritable or selfish in little things, but now she was sometimes cross to the children, and she forgot her old habit of sending Jane to rest and keeping Muriel herself. Roger showed a dim, brotherly perception of something being wrong, and suggested long bicycle rides in the cool of the evening, at which Anne grasped joyfully. Roger did not tell his wife, who he felt had the subject of Anne on her nerves, how silent those rides were, or what a curious expression of seeking relief Anne wore, as she sped down the long hills drinking in the summer breezes. For dealing with the hardly conscious suffering of a mind which shrinks from knowing its own future, the hand of the most loving is too heavy. Only Nature has caught from its Maker the secret of how to touch the bruised reed and the smoking flax.

CHAPTER XII

LADY CHERITON COMES TO LONDON

ALTHOUGH Dacre managed to find time for so many visits to Cobden, these weeks were the fullest and, in one sense, the happiest of his life. It was glorious weather too, and not oppressively hot; and from early morning, when he would bicycle down to South London, to make or more often to cancel some engagement with the workers there, to the constant evening rides to Cobden and the short walks back to his rooms from a party, or a ball, Nature alone might have filled him with her summer joy. He had not dwelt on social success as much of an element in life, but had regarded it more as an accompaniment and a background than an aim in a man's existence. But it was pleasant, very pleasant, to imagine that all the walks of life were open to him, not from position or wealth, but from some personal gift or attraction, some natural social power of his own.

He quite knew how much was due to Lady Cheriton, to Colquhoun, and to Mr. Biddulph; but his success was certainly quite as much due to his own gifts, for which his friends had given him the opening. He was living many a "crowded hour of glorious life," and was in no mood to analyse it. He was too young in mind, too vigorous and careless, not to be making enemies as well as friends, a danger he quite ignored.

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"What excuse has the fellow got for looking so d——d successful?"

It was Colquhoun who said that to Mrs. Murdock one afternoon in Piccadilly. Mrs. Murdock had stopped her Victoria to speak to him. Colquhoun's figure looked very young, and his face very old, as with one foot raised to the step of the carriage, he was graciously accepting an invitation pressed upon him in faintly Parisian English.

Past them in a hansom cab came Henry Dacre, wholly unperceiving of sublunary things, wrapped in some day-dream of his own. He had just come from the House of Commons, and his imagination had been fired by the simple process of taking a private message from Mr. Biddulph on some exceedingly dull question of detail, to a Member of the House. Dacre had been kept waiting about the lobby, which was nearly empty; and had had perforce to fall back upon the Treasury messengers for some outlet, by ordinary conversation, for the oppressive historical sense of the place in which he stood. Burke, Fox, Pitt, Disraeli, Gladstone, jostled each other, about him, while the statue of Cromwell seemed to ask him in religious accents if the blood of the best of kings had been more than a fitting sacrifice. At last the member asked for had appeared, too bored and sleepy that hot afternoon to be surprised at the intensity of the accents of Biddulph's new secretary.

"By Jove, it's an æsthetic improvement," the member had muttered to himself, as he went back to his seat.

He was thinking of poor Whitehead's nose and chin, and contrasting them with those of his successor.

Meanwhile Dacre had briskly left the House; he had an appointment with a remarkable political economist who lived in South Kensington, and he had to look out a book for Mr. Biddulph in the London Library. A good hansom

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took him well on his way, and what beats a hansom for exciting the sense of life and movement in the London streets? Lamb cried for joy as he stood aside to see life pass. Dacre, moving with it and in it, laughed within his soul for pleasure.

He had taken off his hat, and was sitting a little forward in the hansom, unconsciously attracting a good many glances, for in the picture-gallery of the streets this might well pass for a masterpiece. To Mrs. Murdock and to Mr. Colquhoun it was unpleasant, and so the latter said shortly the words already quoted:

“What excuse has the fellow got for looking so d——d successful?”

“Because he is Mr. Biddulph’s secretary?” said Mrs. Murdock, interrogatively.

“I wish we could all be as contented with the gifts the gods send us,” said Colquhoun.

“Ah, but he is to do great things; he told Lady Cheriton so.”

“Really one is glad to know,” said Colquhoun.

“And is it nothing to have made such a conquest already?”

She nodded her farewell, and left Colquhoun something to think about, as he walked his smiling and bowing way to Grosvenor Place. A new idea had occurred to him. He did not see his way yet. But that night, meeting Dacre when dining *en famille* with Lady Berringfield, he was more friendly, more paternal and encouraging than ever.

Lady Berringfield liked Colquhoun because her son liked him; and her son liked him because he amused him in many ways that the mother would not have liked at all, only of course nobody told her.

Dacre had news for Colquhoun, for he had been down

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to Cobden before dinner, and they told him there that Lady Cheriton was at last coming up. Horace piqued himself to a quite curious extent on knowing more about the Cheriton couple than anybody else, and it was so taken for granted that this was the case that Lady Berrington said to him in a voice of surprise:

“Mr. Dacre says that Muriel Cheriton is coming up this week. Surely you told me yesterday that she was not very well, and had decided to stay at Cheriton another fortnight?”

“Well, so Cheriton told me.”

“Perhaps Mr. Dacre is mistaken. Ask him.”

Colquhoun, looking across the table, interrupted Dacre, who was sitting between the two Miss Arbertons, the daughters of the house, with whom he was very intimate.

“Dacre,” he said, “did you say Lady Jane had heard from Lady Cheriton that she was coming up this week?”

“Yes, she had a letter this morning,—no, yesterday morning. She told me so yesterday, and they spoke of it again to-day.”

“He is a day-boarder at Cobden,” said one sister to the other, in a mock whisper across Dacre, who suddenly coloured perceptibly even to Colquhoun’s limited vision.

“He has heard from her himself,” he thought, “and won’t say so.”

Meanwhile the other Miss Arberton had taken up the ball.

“Lady Jane Haselton, though rather plain, has a fascination of her own, I believe.”

“She’s delightful,” said Dacre, trying to speak naturally, but confused in mind by many thoughts. Had he really been nearly every day at Cobden? Ought he to go so often? What did they think of it down there?

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But at the same time Lady Berringfield began to talk about the Massinghams with Colquhoun.

"Poor girls," she said, with a touch of contempt, "nice girls, especially that pretty one that died."

"Most people think Lady Anne the best looking, and she will have some money from her uncle."

"Jane was the odd one. She has made a very bad marriage, has n't she?"

"Hardly enough for bread and butter,—bread and scrape, I imagine."

"But why is Anne to have money?" Then, throwing something to the dog that was teasing her, "Is it anything much?"

"Old John Massingham left his money to the second daughter, because he thought Jane would have her mother's money. But she left it to Eglinton, the eldest son. It is only about £2000 a year, and she won't have it till she is twenty-five."

The words reached Dacre, and added to his confusion of mind. All this was news to him.

"Very comfortable," said Lady Berringfield, kindly. "I should like to see Anne again. I used to like her mother."

She turned to take a scrap of paper from a salver offered to her. She started up, and spoke across her guests to her two daughters.

"Muriel Cheriton has come,—is here, upstairs."

Lady Berringfield was quite excited, excused herself rather hastily to her guests, and disappeared. Dacre was startled, but his mind ran on the theme already started—Cobden, Lady Anne, and the fact that it was possible, nay, practicable, for her to marry a poor man. Then there had been no barriers, and therefore what must be thought of his frequent visits there? He saw that something had

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made the Arbertons quickly drop the little joke about Cobden. At first, his question of what was the state of things, what impressions he was giving rise to at Cobden, held him independently of any other thought. He was not happy or unhappy, he was only breathless.

Meanwhile, Lady Berringfield had flown up-stairs, holding her heavy skirts with one hand. As she came into the long, dimly lighted drawing-room, she saw the tall, thin figure dressed in some softly flowing gown, standing by the open window with her back turned to her, the whole attitude a tired and weary one, almost as if the effort of self-support was being abandoned. Tramps sometimes look like that. It was only until she heard the rustle of Lady Berringfield's garments. Then she turned hastily.

Lady Berringfield and Lady Cheriton were on the exact footing of intimacy that suited Muriel. They told each other the troubles, follies, and sins of their acquaintance, their difficulties with clergymen, villagers, agents, servants. But Lady Berringfield rarely mentioned, and that only casually, the dead husband whom she had loved, and Lady Cheriton talked glibly—just as she talked to the world at large—of the husband who did not love her. And their affection for each other was real, but not deeper than their intimacy.

“Yes, I came up in the end sooner than I intended. The fact is, Susan, that I have come up to see a doctor. Don't be alarmed; I'm not. And don't speak of it, in case it should get round to Cheriton. It is poor old Jinks, the doctor at home, who is getting past work, and who has for years wished to have me in hand. And now he has got me, it seems too much for his nerves.”

Lady Berringfield led her by the hand, as she spoke, down the room, looking at her rather anxiously. Lady Berring-

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field, the large, decorous, plain-featured, substantial matron, seemed by contrast to make the other appear thinner and more delicate.

"I begin to see," said Muriel, sinking into a chair near the open window at the far end of the long drawing-room, "what an amusement and interest health may become as one gets older! To be so interested in one's temperature prevents monotony. And I begin to understand how you and your sisters can talk about your insides for hours together."

It was said a little impertinently, and Lady Berringfield, who generally gave the other her own way, saw that it would not do to enter upon the fascinating subject of symptoms. But she could not resist saying:

"I don't like temperatures."

Muriel turned her head languidly on the back of the chair.

"But you see I find them quite amusing. Well, how is Berringfield getting on?"

Of course the mother flowed after that.

"So you think Horace a good friend for him?"

Muriel's voice was reserved and puzzled.

"Yes," said Lady Berringfield, cheerfully; "I am so glad the boy has taken to a sensible, elderly man of the world, and a friend of yours. By the way, we like your new friend immensely."

"Do you mean Mr. Dacre?"

"Is n't he quite charming? The girls are devoted to him. Here they come."

The girls approached Muriel with a pretty glow of enthusiasm. They were young, fair, unremarkable, but thoroughly self-confident, cheery, and worldly. They could be trusted safely with penniless youths, however handsome.

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"Whom are we devoted to, mother? Are you telling tales?"

"Mr. Dacre."

"Ah, that is a sad tale, indeed; our little feelings are quite in a flutter. We have made a discovery during dinner. The handsome youth is in love."

The two sisters sank together on a low settee near Muriel, clasped hands, and looked commiseration at each other. Lady Cheriton gave a little start and sat up, full of interest.

"Already? Dear me, how these boys spoil their lives just when one is trying to do one's best for them! Who is it?"

The eldest Miss Arberton went on with a little air of apology:

"Really, it is only some nonsense. I was forgetting at the moment. I am afraid I have been rather indiscreet."

Lady Cheriton looked impatient.

"They mean your cousin, Anne Massingham."

"Anne?" cried Lady Cheriton; "how very amusing! But are you sure?"

"We are sure of nothing," said the elder sister.

"If he were not so young, it would be delightful," said Muriel, so seriously that the girls wished that nothing had been said.

"Did you hear the absurd story of Berringfield being engaged?" asked his mother.

"No, to whom?"

And they left the other topic alone.

When the three men came up-stairs, Lady Cheriton, after a slight greeting to Colquhoun, turned, with her face lit up with smiles and interest, to Henry Dacre. It was to her a great pleasure to see him, and she did not conceal it. For

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the moment Dacre thought of nothing but her, and the sense of being faintly dazzled by her came over him again. Moreover, he was now convinced that there was real and proved friendship between them; he had not been to her the pastime of a brief country-house visit; he had misjudged, had been morbid and foolish. But he recognised how high stood her reputation as a good and strong woman in her own world, and there was a touch of reparation in the homage of his greeting.

"I want so much to have a talk," she said. "Susan, may I take Mr. Dacre out on your balcony?"

From her manner, Mr. Dacre might have been a little boy whom she intended to amuse. Colquhoun, sitting by the Miss Arbertons, put the glass into the wrinkles of his face, and looked at her.

"New emeralds, Lady Cheriton?"

"Old ones reset," said Muriel, fingering the long chain of jewels that fell over the misty folds of something coloured like dust or *café au lait*. "Is not the setting well done, Horace?"

"Exquisite. Philips, I see," said Colquhoun, bringing the chain to the level of his near-sighted eyes.

"She is thinner," he thought, "and flushed. She is certainly changed."

He drew back to let her pass to the window, and Dacre followed her.

Lady Cheriton seated herself in a large wicker chair covered with red, and drew a long breath.

"There is some air out here," she cried. Then, with the sweetest sisterly interest, "Do tell me about everything since I saw you at the Murdocks."

"It is a large order," he said,—"thanks to you, more, many more thanks than I can say. It is a very large order,

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indeed. If I ever do anything, it will be owing—" he could not say more; he felt almost as if she were something sacred and apart at that moment; her influence on his life, the power she seemed to possess over other men, and her beauty seen again, realised again, made him nervous. Just as his imagination was fired by the thoughts that thronged in upon him in the lobby of the House, so it became fired now with the notion that here was one of the great women who send men out to affect the life of nations or to inspire great thoughts. But it was only for a moment. Then he went on telling her everything about his work, his hopes, and very much about Mr. Biddulph.

"He does n't give me enough to do," he said incidentally.

"But Mr. Whitehead was busy enough."

"Yes; I can't understand it."

"Mr. Biddulph's private charities took most of Mr. Whitehead's time."

"Why, that 's it, then!" cried Dacre, looking a little hurt; "I don't know anything about them."

"Oh, it 's not easy," Lady Cheriton smiled; "the dear man made it very hard at first for Mr. Whitehead to find them out, and really some of them are very foolish." And she laughed.

"I 've been too full of my own affairs, I 'm afraid," said Dacre, candidly and sadly.

"He would have been just the same with anybody at first," said Muriel. "You need only tell him that you are hurt, and it will be all right."

All this time, he had not alluded to Cobden; Muriel waited, but still it did not come.

"I hear you have been often at Cobden," she said at last.

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Dacre's colour rose; then she had heard it, too.

"Yes," he said, "almost every day. Lady Jane is so kind, and what a delightful place it is! It is such a relief on a hot evening to get out of London."

"And how do you like Anne?"

She turned as she spoke and looked at him. Dacre was sitting on a lower chair than hers. To his own surprise, he found himself looking straight up to the dark eyes and answering their question with his own. And such a fateful answer, one he had not yet given to himself, for he knew that he was telling her quite plainly that he wanted to love Anne, if she would give him permission.

"I am very glad," she said, and turned her eyes away to the dark of the opposite park.

"Do you think—?" she asked, presently, in quietly spoken, detached words.

"I don't dare think yet," he said.

"Well, I shall hope for you," she said very gently. "Oh, it might be so happy," and then, in a voice that cut him to the quick: "I love to see happiness. I should love to see yours and hers."

It was so detached, so sad, that tone of hers, that an immense wave of compassion came over him, an overwhelming sense of the contrast between his life and hers. His own seemed cast in some Dantesque, earthly paradise, with Anne for Beatrice; a dim, accessory figure, perhaps, but full of light—and hers? He could not endure to think of it; he was almost kneeling beside her now.

"We should be cousins," she said kindly, and moved her hand a little away from him; she did not wish him to kiss it.

Colquhoun at that moment dropped the eyeglass that had made some wrinkles into lines of pain, it had been

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there so long; he saw that they had risen. Dacre came back into the room with a great radiance on his face.

Lady Cheriton was left alone on the balcony. She leaned her elbows on it, and rested her head. She had no doubt, no misgiving that she was glad, and she felt relieved on one point. Now all was well; she could help this new friend freely—this career of his which seemed some outlet for aspirations, ambitions of her own. This new ambition, this new interest of helping Henry Dacre was quite safe now. And then she faintly sighed. All that had passed to-night was right, and she could rejoice in the joy that was coming to Henry and to Anne. But it brought over her afresh all the loneliness of her own life.

Anne was her favourite cousin. Henry was an untried friend, but he gave promise of being a true and loyal one. By becoming so much to each other, of necessity they left Muriel more lonely. They could not be all in all to each other without becoming less to her. Not that, as a matter of fact, Anne had ever been very intimate with her cousin. She and Jane often wondered whether any human being were really intimate with Lady Cheriton. It was rather the loss of an imagined joy, a possible resource, that Muriel felt. Anyhow her friendship with Anne was the nearest approach to family intercourse that she possessed. Marriage—at least she thought so to-night—would probably be a check upon it.

But as she stood on the balcony, in the curious quietness that comes at moments in the midst of the greatest city at night, a new thought dawned on her. Yes, she was alone, quite alone. But could she ever have been otherwise? If she were in Anne's place now, if love were hers at its best, would she not still, in her secret soul, in the mysterious life of the spirit, have been alone? She was feeling after a

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truth more often found out in hours of happiness, in full human joy, than in hours of solitary pain. It came clearly to her that she owned a sacred life within her, an unclaimed country that no man had entered into, could enter into; she trembled a little to think that no human being ever had, ever would, ever could cross the barriers of that territory. Even if human love had warmed the atmosphere about it, love could never have possessed that land itself.

The consciousness of the loneliness of the spirit of man is a feeling which comes in different ways, at different dates in men's and women's lives. It is not all a question of happiness; the happiest, the best-loved realise it sometimes more quickly than the others. It is those who have the closest human intercourse, whose souls sometimes stand up suddenly, and make them know that they are alone. To the unhappy, to the unloved, it may come later, because they often imagine it to be their own special misfortune to be alone, and they idealise the human remedy, which they have never known, and yet do not cease to hope for. But at whatever age it comes, early or late, it is the end of youth. It is the knowledge of what are the limits of our being here, and when it comes as a Divine gift, it sets awake within us a great yearning to break the barriers, to reach the infinite. Is not this "the pain of finite hearts that yearn"?

Did this feeling come to Muriel that night as a reward for a tacit, half-conscious sacrifice? In those few moments she passed through an overpowering awe into trembling joy at the touch of the living Truth, Who, having made her, could alone complete His own work and fill to overflowing the measure of her needs.

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Yet how often do men and women come down from Tabor, to find only confusion at the foot of the mount, and as they are not saintly apostles they are quickly swallowed up in that confusion, even adding to it by their own follies and sins! So perhaps Muriel, when meeting the chilly look of Colquhoun's eyeglass, came back to earth with a shock. At any rate, she appeared to be her London self again in a moment.

CHAPTER XIII

“ BUT ”

HENRY DACRE was waiting in the handsome cheerless drawing-room of Mr. Biddulph's house in Portland Place. He stood with his long hands clasped behind him, and the fingers moving with a little nervous twitch.

Morning had brought reflection, anxiety, questioning. What had been in his mind as a vague future possibility, not canvassed or examined into willingly, had taken shape last night, almost without his own volition. He had discovered that the world thought he was in love with Lady Anne; and filled with sudden excitement, he had gone on to confide that same love to Lady Cheriton. And surely this was love,—the sense of her sweetness, the reverence for her spiritual nature, the confidence in her heart. And yet ought he to ask her for all this? Had he the right? The right! Was it not a duty after last night; would it be honourable now not to do it? This was what he wanted to think,—that he ought to do it. And why not? If she were richer than he, it was not very much. He had a name as old as hers; he had the treasure of the same faith, to her so priceless; and he had, too, that career, that future, in which she believed as much as he did himself. There was in him sufficient delicacy of soul to refrain from questioning as to whether she loved him; he would not risk answering

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that query in the affirmative. So he might do it? Why not? Why not?

Mr. Biddulph's step was lighter than might have been expected. He came up and touched Henry's shoulder. Dacre turned quickly, and smiled as few people saw him smile.

"What's the matter?" was the gruff question.

"The matter?"

"You look ill or idle." He laughed off the last word as if he did not wish to force a confidence.

"May I speak to you?"

"By all means."

"I was thinking of proposing to Lady Anne Massingham."

He was surprised at the change in Biddulph's face. There was a look more tender and bright than he had ever seen on the rough features before. Biddulph put his hand on the young man's shoulder.

"I don't see why you should be hopeless," he said, looking at him earnestly; "no man is good enough for that kind of woman, but she may not think so herself." It amused and touched him to have this confidence and to see his favourite's handsome face so rueful.

"But,—" said Henry, and paused.

"But?" echoed Biddulph, smiling. "Do you mean that you want to go to Cobden this morning? I've no objection. Pluck up heart. I really do think it is an occasion which justifies a stiff brandy and soda in the morning, if necessary."

The smile on Dacre's pale face was faint.

"Yes," he said, "I will go now."

"God bless you; get along."

Henry rode his bicycle as one pursued, and it was in

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barely an hour from the time he left Mr. Biddulph, that he found himself waiting in the little anteroom at Cobden.

"I will stay here," he said to the footman who was leading him to the drawing-room, after he had asked for Lady Anne.

He stood by the window that opened on to the lawn, pale and a little dishevelled, his hands clutched and unclutched in nervous, uncertain movements; and the footman, had he followed the kind promptings of the fellow creature, would have proposed the same remedy as that of Mr. Biddulph—a brandy and soda. Lady Anne apparently could not be found, and Henry began to turn about the little room with long strides. It was stupid, he thought, to have so much valuable china lying about; in his condition of mind it would become a temptation to break it. Would Anne never come? She ought to come; it was not like her to delay. He felt dimly that angel guardians should not keep people waiting. He watched the door, then turned impatiently again, and saw that she was standing in the window, coming in from the garden, a large hat shading her high white forehead. She had many roses in her hands, and their green branches trailed against her white skirt. All at once, suddenly and sweetly, his agitation was calmed. Light, rest, and peace exhaled from her. Is there not in every man a whole side to his nature, that thrills at times responsively to the entirely good woman,—sister, wife, mother, Madonna, Mater Dolorosa if need be? Henry felt this thrill, took it, as it were, home to his own heart, and blessed the Maker of them both. He pressed the fingers of his left hand on his forehead for a moment, and as she saw how very pale he was, a rosy colour crept up from the poised neck, till it flushed round the cool wells of light in the blue eyes. Then she spoke, but it was only to say:

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“How d’ ye do?”

“I came,” said Henry, and after this statement of a self-evident fact, he was silent again. “May we go into the wood?”

“Yes,” said Anne, gently, and began putting the roses on an oak table near the window.

A long trail of thorny green caught on her gown. She took hold of it, and tried in vain to disentangle it. Dacre caught it, and in his nervous impatience, seeing that she, too, trembled a little, pulled it almost roughly. A big thorn caught in her white finger, and red beads of blood rose from the scratch. Neither of them heeded it; they were still silent. Only when in the wood did he speak; and then, with a holier, humbler look than she had ever seen in his face before, he asked her if she would be his wife.

“Heaven knows,” he said, with an energy of conviction, “that I am not worthy of you.”

And then she gave a low laugh that startled him. With such a sound, perhaps, do the cherubs and the babies in heaven laugh in unison with the great celestial harmonies. It was so gentle, happy, and yet humorous, that it brought him still further to himself.

“Do you mean that you could love me?” he said.

“Why not?” said Anne, very gravely now, and the words seemed to catch his breath, for they were an echo of his own.

He had supposed he would kneel down to kiss her hand, but instead he bent and kissed her very reverently on the lips, while he was conscious of a soul’s effort to leave no part of his nature unconsecrated by the action for ever, yea, for ever and ever. For so do men purpose. And he saw the happy tears well up in her eyes.

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So they stayed in that wood, in a very perfect hour—an hour that would be among those “happier things” that may yet prove a sorrow’s crown in remembrance.

“Great Heavens,” said Mr. Biddulph, “is it *de rigueur* on these occasions to slam doors? If so, pray don’t consider me.”

“I felt that I must come and thank you at once for the happiest day of my life.”

“It passes me to find out what you have done to deserve her.”

“And me also.”

“By the way, what has become of the ‘but’ I heard this morning?”

“Was there a ‘but’?”

PART II

CHAPTER XIV

ANNE ALONE IN THE WOODS

HENRY was gone. Anne, after straining her eyes to watch the last glimpse of the bicycle, as it sped down a hill, some two miles away, let her head sink on the gate.

What a relief that he had to go, and yet the pain was there also!

"But I could not," she said to herself, "have gone with him to Jane. I can do it alone, but not, dear love, with him."

An expression came into her face that was new to it, for which bitter is a word too strong and too defined. It seemed as if the face were thinner, more lined, not with age, but with the experience of a new lesson, learnt with resistance and a sense of irony. There was a desolation, an aloofness in the attitude of the graceful white figure as she stood leaning on the gate.

"Why did he come now? It is too soon, too soon," she thought. "I did not think it would happen for a long time yet. I thought . . . I thought he would grow gradually, perhaps for a year or more, to love me very much, and that then he would do it—not now—but perhaps—Why do I find

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it so hard to believe that it is all right? I have let myself trust to my instincts so often, that I am superstitious about them. But it is n't fair, it is n't right. One ought to believe. Ah, if I did n't love him so terribly strongly as I do, I think I could believe in his love for me. Oh, why must I be stupid and unhappy and aching to-day, my engagement day? If only he had not come now, or if I had refused him! Years hence he might have loved me. But I could n't help yielding to him to-day. What could I refuse when that voice asked me? And did it not," she cried, turning on herself, "look and seem true? He was so pale, so anxious; poor Henry! Pale and anxious, not because he feared for my answer, but . . . I hardly know why. Could it be some fear of the future, or because a man must feel like that when he has to propose? *Has to propose!*"

Anne buried her face in her hands, and her elbows pressed hard on the five-barred gate. Tears came but slowly and with burning.

She recalled how she had stood in the window in silence, watching him before he knew that she was there, noting his paleness, his restless, nervous movements, with a strange joy, a feeling that overcame thought, and from which doubt hid itself. The Henry waiting for her was strangely, and yet as a matter of course, her own, and their lives were surely bound together. And so she had been happy.

Raising her head, and looking proudly into the slope of the wood in the hills beyond, she claimed that day's happiness.

But in a few moments the head sank again, as the instinctive knowledge that she had had all along oppressed her. The firm, gentle touch of his hand, and the infec-

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tious light and strength of his eyes were gone, and without him there to make her quite forget herself, she asked with piteous hunger what else besides the joy of his presence he had to give her.

"If only, only I had refused him, I should have known if he loved me. I should at any rate have roused him; he would have had to realise me, to know me. Now he is like a man walking in his sleep, and I am his shadow, his guardian angel."

The saddest of smiles lit her face.

"I am the 'good girl,' all that he could wish for, all that he ought to have. He thinks it all so right, so appropriate. Oh, why did I not have the strength to say 'No'?"

It would have been less hard to bear if she had believed Henry Dacre to be incapable of love, to be one of those men consumed by noble ambitions, who are often loved, but have not the talent of loving very completely in return. It would have been a defect in his character, but it would have been less terrible for her than this strange conviction of hers that he would love some day, but did not love now. Poor Anne, who had not, from her childhood to her twenty-third year, wasted her treasure of love on fancies and follies,—had she hoarded it all for this? But there is, in the use of all our highest faculties, a mysterious joy that will not be quenched. In spite of all, Anne might have grown to a great sense of joy in loving, even as any one who does what he does supremely well knows the joy of so doing it, had it not been for another element in her nature. Anne's was a trained, educated conscience, and her ethical sense hardly allowed a simplicity of passion. She must ask herself constantly: "Am I doing right?" "Have I done right?"

And here the case grew more complicated, for though she

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could not feel that she had actually done wrong, she could not feel that the thing was wholly right.

When Henry Dacre had first seen her, a few short weeks ago, she was kneeling before the altar, and her face was to him a revelation of the light and peace in her soul. If he had seen her on the evening of their engagement, even he, taking her thoughts—herself—so easily, yet reverently, for granted as he did, must have perceived the difference. She was caught in the toils of her own human heart, yearning and fearing, rejoicing with tears of sorrow.

"Oh, my God," she prayed, "if I have done wrong in promising, I need not go back; I must live with him, and love him, and be his wife now. Only, dear Lord, if there must be pain, if we are on the wrong road, don't let him suffer for it, don't let me bring him harm and evil. You made him to be something great in this world and the next; don't let me stop him."

Peace would not come this time as it had come that other evening. The lights and darks, the stormy atmosphere of passion, held her too closely. Yet to men and women of good will there are angels sent in all hours of pain of mind or of body, though they may only give strength to bear, not consolation to lighten the load.

CHAPTER XV

RELIEF AND REACTION

LADY CHERITON did not sleep well after she had talked with Henry Dacre on Lady Berringfields' balcony. The air seemed stifling even in the large rooms of her London house. It was one of those eighteenth-century houses in which everything was sacrificed to the reception rooms; and the few large bedrooms, inconveniently high up, were low and plain in design. The largest had been fitted up, not with great taste, but with every luxury, for Lady Cheriton, at the time of her marriage, and had hardly been altered since then. Muriel had never been much interested in the heavy, gorgeous house; and after a few years she had grown to dislike it intensely. In it had passed the most miserable hours of her early married life. In it she had learnt what the world had to teach to the deserted wife of Lord Cheriton. Her unhappiest, her least good moods had been lived through here, whereas her simplest, best, and kindest feelings had been mostly aroused in a comparatively quiet life at Cheriton.

To-night she seemed hardly able to breathe, and she longed for the fresh breezes from the hills that blew into her bedroom in the high tower at Cheriton.

She tried to lie down, but she could not sleep, and then she dozed off to wake with an uneasy start in the first light of the June morning.

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The house was very still, and a cooler air blew through the open windows. Muriel felt nervous and wakeful. Then she recognised her own fears, for it was to-day,—this morning,—that she was to see the doctor. But the feeling of fear left her as her mind became more clear in the stillness. The sense of awe was on her again. She got up and lay on the sofa, where it would be cooler, and drew over her a wrap lying there. Her hair was intolerably heavy, and she drew it back and rolled it ineffectively into a ball, from which it soon fell on her shoulders. Her eyes were large and questioning, as though she would, if possible, make them see beyond their own limits and report to her of the invisible. Have we not all at moments experienced that intense sense of questioning—fate, life, and, most of all, death, standing almost palpably about us till our brains reel and we know nothing but a consciousness of physical suffocation? But Muriel would not take nature's relief, would not tell herself that she was faint and let herself sink into looking for physical comfort. No, she would face these thoughts. How could she afford to give way when questions so awful and so practical came before her mind?

If Dr. Jinks were right, and she had, possibly, to end this life and to die, how was she to face death?

It had often been very hard to see what to do in life, but on the whole she had done her best to see what was right and to do it. "On the whole," she thought, for lately she had been less confident of herself and her motives, more hard on her own past. It is always so when the soul gains a wider horizon. Muriel could not now dwell with any self-satisfaction on the victory of her youth, the rejection of the one man she had been tempted to love. She shivered to think how nearly she had fallen. Would she

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have kept right at all if it had not been for the friend who had looked on—for Biddulph? Those who have fallen cling to the circumstances that can always excuse so much. So too do those who are true conquerors give to the accidents of their case a large share of the victory.

Yes, it had been hard often to know what to do in life, but now she wanted to know what to do in prospect of death.

There must be much to do. Death surely would not be the only thing in life that needed no forethought, no wisdom, no strength. She had never seen a death-bed; she had arrived too late to be with her mother at her death. Still she had known that nothing had happened then and that the poor worldly little mother had been warned by nobody, and would probably have been very angry if anybody had attempted to warn her of what was coming.

Muriel knew that the business affairs of this life should be so left that nobody should suffer, and from her characteristic wish to settle everything herself, she had long ago done all such duties, and left all directions even for her funeral. She had, too, a wonderful design by a great sculptor of a mediæval-minded tomb on which she and Lord Cheriton were figured in marble side by side, that, thus united in effigy, she might make her last protest against scandal, her last effort to keep up both principle and appearances.

"No," she thought now, "at the very worst,—and Jinks only said it was a possible danger,—that is all finished." But surely there must be more to do for herself. What was it?

She felt still the glow, the gleam that had entered her heart in that strange moment after dinner on the prosaic modern, red cloth-covered balcony. A pang of annoyance

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came with the thought of the sudden transition that had followed the rather ill-natured, rather sophisticated gossip with Colquhoun and young Lord Berringfield, who had come in afterwards. Now in the stillness of the dawn the atmosphere of awe and reverence was about her again. She felt the need to see her way more clearly, to respond to that elusive light that sometimes shone from behind the endless affairs of life, gleaming through the crowds of men and women, as the light shines fitfully through a wood of trees. If nothing in life mattered much in comparison to those moments, bearing as they did the unuttered secret of their own value, what must they mean to one who perhaps was about to die before many weeks had passed?

Muriel began to wonder as she lay there how the people she knew and loved best would take the position she was in. She tried to make out what they were really thinking in their hearts, how they lived each in the solitude of his own soul? Her thoughts turned first to Mr. Biddulph, and with quickened perceptions she realized in a new way how sad a spiritual world he lived in. She felt that its motto would be—"Tho' He slay me yet will I trust in Him." A true instinct told her that such a life was not for her, and could only be meant for a heroic few. God spoke to Job out of the whirlwind; Muriel sought to find him in the whisper of a gentle air.

Mr. Merton, the clergyman at Cheriton, she loved and looked up to, but he worried her with the insistence and in-consequence of his detailed Ritualism.

Nor could she feel drawn to the religion of her Roman Catholic cousins, although she envied it. The mists of the modern spirit made her feel their definiteness of belief to be crude, and more fitted to a child's mind than to her own. Then, too, at the back of her consciousness had been

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written the great Protestant tradition of the old-fashioned schoolroom, that nothing good could come from Rome.

Yet when one of those cousins—Mary—had died not two years ago, although she had not been present she had had so many letters from Anne, and had seen the sisters so shortly afterwards, that she had realised and had been deeply impressed by very much of what had passed by the death-bed. She had learnt enough to feel then and to feel again now something of what has been well described by one who was far from the faith of the Massinghams:—

“ Meanwhile Laura realised the force of the saying that Catholicism is the faith to die in.

“ The concentration of all these Catholic minds upon the dying of Augustina, the busy fraternal help evoked by every stage of her *via dolorosa*, was indeed marvellous to see. ‘ It is a work of art,’ Laura thought, with that new power of observation which had developed in her. ‘ It is—it must be—the most wonderful thing of its sort in the world! ’

“ For it was no mere haphazard series of feelings or kindnesses. It was an act—a function—this ‘ good death ’ on which the sufferer and those who assisted her were equally bent. Something had to be done, a process to be gone through; and every one was anxiously bent upon doing it in the right, the prescribed, way—upon omitting nothing. The physical fact indeed became comparatively unimportant, except as the evoking cause of certain symbolisms—nay, certain actual and direct contacts between earth and heaven, which were the distraction of death itself—which took precedence of it, and reduced it to insignificance.”

And was not this what Muriel longed for now, those “certain actual and direct contacts between earth and

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heaven, which were the distraction of death itself—which took precedence of it, and reduced it to insignificance”? Would not such a death be the completion, the making actual of those moments of spiritual insight which she had known from time to time lately?

Still Lady Cheriton did not feel that her cousins’ faith could be in any sense possible for her. “If I had been brought up to all their superstitions perhaps I should have been happier, but it is impossible now.” She shook her head finally as if to close a discussion, and rose and moved restlessly to the window and looked out.

The plane trees in the square below looked bright in the glow of the early sunshine in spite of their black trunks. It was intensely quiet, only an occasional market cart or belated cab breaking the general rest, and the twittering sparrows picking up the grain that had fallen on the cobbles of the empty cab-stand, sounded quite noisy in the stillness.

In the morning the maid found Lady Cheriton sound asleep.

In another hour she was at the doctor’s, and in another hour and a half she was saying to him: “Then you think I may dismiss all thoughts of an operation?”

“Certainly,” and the great man smiled with the benevolence of a paternally minded courtier at the beautiful Countess. He was brown-haired, not yet middle-aged, strong, square, and vigorous, with nothing exceptional in his appearance except his hands, that were exquisitely formed, and combined strength and delicacy of touch to a marvellous degree.

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"You are not strong, you know," he went on gently, "and it would be foolish to give you the unnecessary strain of such an operation."

"Why do you suppose that Dr. Jinks was so anxious?"

"I suppose, Lady Cheriton, that he was oppressed by a sense of responsibility from the importance of the case—and no wonder. His letters read as if he had your health a little on his nerves." Muriel laughed, and her eyes were merry; something within her sang with joy.

"Don't rush to the conclusion that you are perfectly well and strong because Dr. Jinks's fears were groundless," he went on. "I think you are overworked; you should really make a point of getting plenty of rest." And then a few minutes more were spent in giving and receiving excellent advice, which both knew was not in the least likely to be followed.

Only those who have been through the same experience as Muriel can understand the sense of lightness that she felt in mind and body. She was treading on air, hearing joy bells ringing in her ears, detecting the smell of flowers from afar, as she crossed the pavement to her carriage.

She was astonished at the degree of her relief after the interview. Was life really worth so much, that his reassuring words should bring such a reaction of joy and high spirits? Or had it been rather that death was so awful and that a chilly fear had mingled itself lately in the web of her difficult life? Anyhow, happiness of any kind was to be made the most of,—and, after all, was this happiness so very unreasonable? She was only thirty, very beautiful, and she had the very best of all that toiling, thinking, or talking London could give. Surely, as Colquhoun had said to Dacre, the life of the Countess of Cheriton had many compensations which Muriel did not under-

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value. A thrill of life filled her heart as she drove home-wards, and her slight figure and dark, exquisite face held the light and fire that not many feel intensely, and fewer still are capable of expressing.

But, meaning to find life happy, she was the less fit to bear with the trials of the rest of the day. When she reached home, a little over-excited and more tired than she knew, she was told that the stud-groom wanted to see her. Holmstead was a man whom she particularly liked and trusted; who she knew was thoroughly loyal to herself and extremely respectable; his family had been for three generations in service at Cheriton. He had come to tell her that his lordship had dismissed him suddenly, on the ground that he intended to bring the race-horses to Cheriton, and that the men who came with them would replace the present grooms at the Abbey.

Holmstead's face spoke of suffering and hurt pride, and a look of intense injury and helpless wrath deeply lined his large features.

Muriel had a struggle for self-command. She had rarely felt more angry, and she knew the cowardice that had done this thing without her knowledge. Yet she decided with the quick instinct of self-preservation that she must submit. It was not a moment at which she could afford a losing battle for the sake of poor Holmstead.

So with bleeding heart she let the man think that she had known what he had come to tell her, and that Lord Cheriton had himself told her of it, although in fact no communication of any sort had passed between the husband and wife since she had come to London.

Fearfully wounded and despairing, the old man understood that she would not take his part, and with proud humility he told her that nothing in the way of compensation,

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no other post on the estates at Cheriton or elsewhere, would be accepted by him.

She had been sitting at the writing-table, and he had been standing at a little distance, the very picture of an old type of family servant, respectful and self-respecting also. He went away after a low, steady bow, declining tacitly to enter upon any future plans of his own.

Muriel rose the moment he was gone, and strode up and down the room with long steps, uncertain and hesitating. She had been really fond of Holmstead, and had done all that she could do for him for years. And now she knew that he was ruined, too old in years and in ways to occupy any good post in a really first-rate stable, and unfitted for a small one. The thought, too, that she would not have him any more, with his kind, strong eyes, eager to follow out her wishes, and never failing in respect for his master, was painful in the extreme. And he had seen and known so much of their private lives. Was Cheriton mad, to drive away all that was respectable and trustworthy from about him?

"Ah, it is on purpose," she groaned, as thought became clearer. "It is another blow aimed at me. It is for my sake that Holmstead is to suffer."

This complete revolution in the stables, without a word of warning, the dismissal of a true servant and friend without her knowing it, seemed to indicate some new and dangerous plan of action. Hitherto Cheriton had been let alone to go its own way, or rather to go hers. Would it have been wiser to have shut her eyes to what went on at Cobden, and not to try to keep it in hand at all?

Muriel was seriously alarmed, and annoyed with herself for being so. She had been through many a strait place before, with a cool head and steady nerve. If her enemy

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saw her falter now, saw that she was nervous or anxious, how mercilessly cruel his weakness could be! No, she would not and could not betray any feelings or ask anything as a favour. But was it certainly too late to take a high-handed line and to insist on keeping Holmstead? She had carried such a point as that before now, by sheer force of will. Should she risk it again? It would be generous, unselfish, a good action, and she had wished so keenly lately to do some good in a life that had seemed, before the great doctor reassured her, to be likely to be brief. Would she do it for Holmstead?

Tall and erect, with burning colour in her cheeks, she looked just then exactly the beautiful presentation of will and courage that Lord Cheriton both feared and hated. Then the flash went out, and she sank back into a chair, white and faint.

"He says the faintness will go off, if I do what he tells me. I wish it would, it is so inconvenient."

She could only lie back with closed eyes, and a feeling of nervous exhaustion, until luncheon time. But with the physical support of food and wine the glow of courage did not come back. Calm reasoning convinced her that she must ignore the insult and affect indifference. She could do no good now, and might do further harm; only for the future she must be more vigilant, and be better informed of what was passing at Cheriton. She would not again be stabbed at in the dark.

It was altogether not such a very new experience to be hurt in her best feelings, or to be humiliated; and pride and determination brought her to much her usual self, by the time she had dressed to go out to dinner,—only that self was harder, more angry and combative, more greedy of distraction and relief than it had been for some time.

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Probably in any case Muriel would have reacted somewhat against the thoughts and feelings of the last week. Back in London in the season, and suddenly relieved from physical fear, she was likely to be caught in the current of the life about her. She had lately had severe thoughts of the world and its ways, and had judged harshly of the motives of even her good works, feeling as if a new spirit were needed even in them. Now she felt vaguely irritated by these ideas as unreal and unpractical, and half unconsciously she put them from her.

Apart from this move of Lord Cheriton's, which roused her to a determined spirit of combat, she was seldom at her best in the same house with him, especially in London. She could not forget for an hour the vices that made his life an insult to her, while the large, heartless audience of society was about her, gossiping and commenting thereon.

To-night Lady Cheriton had been asked to dine with Mr. and Mrs. James Maurice, to meet a royal prince. It was a house to which she went rather often now, although at one time she had been careful to avoid it, for at one time she had known that she must keep at a distance all danger of being seen with that distinguished statesman, Mr. James Maurice. Now, dining there was a quite uninteresting and ordinary event to her.

The royal prince was young and a little negative, but he was delighted with Lady Cheriton, and, to talk to her, almost abandoned Mrs. Maurice, one of the handsomest women in London.

Mrs. Maurice was large, sumptuous, and golden-haired. She was not an interesting woman, and had thrown her husband into uncongenial society. James Maurice was at this time the leader of the House of Commons, and his bored face at race-meetings and other kindred amusements

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was well known in the smart world. His wife had the sort of attraction for Muriel that is often felt by rival beauties. Moreover the husband was the one man who had ever interested Muriel very much indeed. But that was very long ago, a story only known to themselves and to Mr. Biddulph.

Later in the evening, when royalty had left, Mr. Maurice stood talking with Lady Cheriton a little apart, and Mr. Biddulph, appearing in the doorway, was imperiously summoned to join them.

"I am asking her," said Mr. Maurice, smiling at Biddulph, "whom she intends to put in at Cheriton. I hear on good authority that old Snead will retire."

"Yes," said Muriel, "but he asked me not to tell you."

"Well, give us a decent member, and one who does not talk more than old Snead did; his silence was a reliable quantity."

And then they asked Biddulph his opinion on a new tragedy, and the talk turned to things literary.

CHAPTER XVI

THE STATESMAN'S EVENING PARTY

THINGS sacred need quiet, silence, and shade for their nourishment and stability. To Dacre the day that had borne a sacramental peace and joy was to close in a different atmosphere. He dined with Colquhoun, Lord Berringfield, and one or two others, and the food reached a rare exquisiteness of good taste and refinement, while the conversation was witty, in Colquhoun's special style.

To hear Colquhoun talk among certain kindred spirits was to hear a specialty, a brand of his own that he refrained from offering even to the most modern of modern women.

"Are you going to the Maurices' to-night?" he asked Dacre, as they were smoking after dinner. "I am taking the unwilling Berringfield."

"Yes," said Dacre, "I think so."

"Berringfield has no sense of his duty to royalty. Come, I will allow you one more cigarette, and then we go."

Lady Cheriton, as Dacre knew, was dining at the Maurices', and he intended to look in there, to tell her of the great event of the day. He would not stay long. He had told Anne that he would go to Mass and Communion in the morning, at half-past eight, as that was the hour at which she would be going at Cobden. His evening so far had jarred on him, but it was nearly over.

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Berringfield, Colquhoun, and Dacre arrived before the prince left, and Dacre stood about listlessly, waiting for his opportunity. Once indeed Lady Cheriton nodded to him in all friendliness, but with no summoning look. Left by his two companions, who had entered the circle close about Mrs. Maurice and her royal guest, Dacre felt a little lost in the crowd. He realised, or fancied he did, what a distance there was between himself and the great of the earth, what a small hold he had upon this society, after all the petting and flattery he had received these last weeks. He felt how swiftly he could disappear, unobserved and forgotten. And then he remembered those words of Mr. Biddulph:

“When a man grows fat or generally when he marries, they forget all about him and——”

Then there was a little bustle, and Dacre was jammed against a door-post, and Lady Cheriton and Mrs. Maurice and others were curtseying, and the prince was going, and gone.

A gloom possessed Henry, and he turned instinctively to question what might cure it. Why, to be indifferent, to be independent of “the whole d——d show,” to live a life of his own with Anne, and do a man’s work for his country without favour or flattery. A glow came into his heart when he thought of these things. How few hours had passed since that hour in the wood! Surely earth and Heaven’s best things could be had outside of this world of society. It was good to have tasted it, to have a man’s knowledge of it, but it was essential to save your soul alive.

Mechanically now he watched Mr. Biddulph pass close to him and join Muriel and Mr. Maurice at a little distance from the throng. He wondered what they were talking about;—he would go, it was nearly half-past eleven. He

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began to move, when Lady Berringfield kept him for a moment. Then he turned again to go, when he was touched on the arm.

"Dacre," said Biddulph's gruff voice, "Lady Cheriton wants you. Don't tell her I have run away," and he pushed past him smiling.

Henry moved quickly.

"This is Mr. Dacre," said Lady Cheriton, with her most winning smile, and a little pleading in the manner with which she presented him to the statesman.

Henry was tall and his eyes met those of the great man on a level. The face that had seemed sallow in colouring, irregular in design, and yet smooth in surface when looked at from afar, did not improve on nearer view. It was still a mask provoking the question whether the polished surface concealed much reserved strength, or only betrayed a lack of vitality and conviction. But as he smiled in greeting him, Henry thought he had never seen a happier combination of a great man's manner with the *bonhomie* of a good fellow.

"I am telling Mr. Maurice that you really know South London."

"I know a little of real South London Irishmen," said Dacre, "but I am afraid I am of no use beyond that."

"It led you to write an article that I read with much interest," said Mr. Maurice, kindly, while Muriel smiled her pleasure at him. "But nothing so deep is in question now. It is only," and he leant his shoulders against the mantelpiece behind him, "one of those nuisances, a bye-election, and I'm told there's a large Irish vote going dead against us. Why on earth," a little impatiently, "these people go in for all that will destroy religious education and break the power of the priests I cannot see."

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Henry Dacre talked a little earnestly but vividly of the men and their conditions of life, and how from the wretchedness of their existence they had become the lawful and proper prey of every agitator and anarchist.

"But why don't their priests do more?"

Dacre detected a touch of antipathy in the tone.

"I might say why have the Anglican clergy, with numbers and wealth, not done more with their own poor? Nobody realises our poverty and weakness as a body. We have n't the men, and we certainly have not the money."

Dacre began alluding to some of the most striking results of a statistical table he had made.

Mr. Maurice looked politely interested, but Dacre suspected that he felt the intrusion of figures in the evening as part of the boredom of a bye-election. He paused.

"Well," said Maurice, "you know these people. I am going to speak there to-morrow night. Will you come and talk to them as a Catholic? It would be really useful."

Dacre's heart beat quickly; to be asked to speak on the same platform, the same night, as the great man!

"I shall be delighted," he said. "I will get," he continued, half glancing at Lady Cheriton, "my friends at one of the Working Men's Clubs to come to the meeting."

"A good idea," said Maurice, graciously, as he moved away.

"That is capital," cried Lady Cheriton, with a little air of excitement, "and I can see that he likes you already. Will you have time enough to prepare your speech?"

"Oh, I shall do it to-night; I must go at once. Another thing to thank you for, and I have much to tell you; might I come to-morrow?"

"Do, to-morrow at twelve, to rehearse the speech! I have often done audience in that way before," and a

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reminiscence of doing it to her host came to her mind with a little pathos, but without any deeper sentiment.

Dacre hurried away, and, seated as soon as possible at his table, began making notes for the speech. In the middle of his work he paused and helped himself to a glass of soda-water; drinking it, he glanced at the clock and saw that it was nearly five.

Needless to add that it was late before he awoke with an aching head that morning, and thought, with a movement of regret, that Anne must be just then walking back from Mass through the wood! — probably she was dressed in white. He could see her passing between the trunks of the silver birches, the white draperies, dappled in gold and green reflections, looking up, perhaps, with her blue eyes at the blue heavens.

But she would understand that he was obliged to sit up last night to prepare that speech. How could he possibly have got up early that morning to go to Mass? As it was, his head was aching. Blomfield, Mr. Maurice's secretary, would soon arrive to give him directions as to the evening, and he must rehearse the speech to Lady Cheriton at twelve. Ah, he did long to do it well! It would be intolerable to disappoint Lady Cheriton.

CHAPTER XVII

A SPEAKER OF NO MEAN ORDER

"I BELIEVE I have prepared too much," said Henry, wearily, but half laughing, as he leant back in Lady Cheriton's brougham, his hat on his knees and one hand pressed on his forehead; "I feel I have muddled myself hopelessly."

"Try to think of something else," said Muriel, brightly.

She wore a high black silk gown and small black velvet bonnet, but while something suggested that she was dressed for the evening, a man would not distinguish what made the difference from day attire. A shimmering dust-cloak of the colour of faded roses fell about her, softening the effect of the rich black gown. Her eyes were bright and her manner eager; it was a long time since she had been so keenly interested, so roused out of her own life and anxieties.

"Can you make yourself think of what you like?" he asked, turning to her and trying to meet her glance, as a street lamp flashed its light on them for a moment.

"Not always, but often"; then, with a sigh, "but I have practised managing my own mind for years. If you have things you dare not think of, you must look elsewhere in self-defence," and her voice trembled a little. If she had intended to distract his thoughts from the coming meeting, she could not have done it better.

They had spent much of the day together. She had

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listened to three or four different plans for the speech, and had inwardly trembled lest they should all emerge in one hodge-podge. For although recognising the brilliancy of some of the thoughts and their expression, and impressed by the way he brought the facts home to her, she was far too eager for success to be easily satisfied. She had planned everything he should do during the day, had sent him out for a good walk, made him eat a light but sufficient dinner at her house, and now was bringing him with her to the scene of action.

Muriel had never talked to him of herself before, but just now, in this moment of excitement, she made the effort, even as a stage-manager might go any lengths in his efforts to send a young prima-donna on the boards in a fair condition of nerves. They were crossing Battersea Bridge, and could see how the dark river, with its endless sparkling reflections, was trying to mingle lamplight in its own tragic movement, as it bore onward the secrets of the great city.

"Do you ever notice, when you are at a party, how the women look at chance moments, when they are not obliged to speak and smile?"

"No," said Dacre, with a boyish note of interest, while he added to himself, "I have only watched you at such moments, nobody else."

"Well, watch and see," said Muriel, "or rather don't do anything of the kind. It is n't fair. My troubles are too well known, and my world is too ready with the only kind of pity it has in stock, for me to be willing to gratify it by looking sad. And by force of not showing things, I am sure that, to a great extent, you deaden your power of feeling them. The curious thing is that you also lose your power of getting absolute distraction. I think the poor, or Southern women, who have the relief of pas-

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sion, are carried off by the next feeling of joy or pleasure. They go back to the pain again, but they get more holidays intermingled."

They had passed, meanwhile, into a different region of the town, where gas-jets flared and threw hard light on costers' carts and white-faced men and women, bargaining chiefly, it seemed, for cheap and repulsive fish. She was inwardly dwelling with horrified curiosity on their faces and their lives. Were her sufferings now and in the past more than a shadow of theirs? If so, did it not deepen the gloom indefinitely and fearfully? But she did not wish Henry to think yet of the audience he was about to face, or he would begin preparing that unfortunate speech again.

"You did not think I was so analytical?" she said lightly, "and, after all, how difficult it is to talk with absolute reality about oneself! I do enjoy myself a great deal; I don't mean it is all sham."

Dacre had not spoken; now he exclaimed eagerly:

"You could not be unreal if you tried."

Muriel's laugh rang out.

"Could n't I? My dear Mr. Dacre,—no, I forgot we are to be cousins,—my dear Henry, how you do believe in your friends!"

"How I believe in you, rather!" he cried with a voice that showed he was afraid of his own boldness.

Muriel was silent, looking out of the window. Then she said, in quite a different voice, quick and businesslike:

"There is the central Conservative Committee room," and she pulled the check-string. "Enquire there, where the blue placards are, the way to Housman's warehouses."

The footman obeyed, and as he mounted the box and they moved on again, she said:

"Now we are close there, I want to give you some

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advice. To begin with, feel for your audience, follow them, or, if necessary, fight them, then stick to bringing in your main facts, and trust your peroration to the gods."

He could only just catch the words, for they found themselves, almost suddenly, in the midst of a dense moving crowd, shouting and boohooing in what sounded like strangely deep and menacing tones. The carriage moved at a foot's pace. Dacre for a moment could not see to which of the political parties the crowd belonged; a little more light from a flaring butcher's shop showed the Liberal colours. The heads of the nearest men were close to the window, and some stared in at the lady as they passed. Then a voice cried: "Mr. Dacre!" and a very dirty hand was thrust into the carriage.

"Coming along to our meeting!" said a thin, white-faced little man with a red rosette; "there's a lot of the Club coming; we'll be real glad to see you."

"No, no," said Dacre, laughing and taking his hand; "I'm the other side, and come down on purpose to speak. I hope that some of the Club are coming to hear me."

"Are you?" cried his friend, in accents of bitter disappointment; "ah, but sure," he went on, after a moment, still holding on to the carriage window as it moved slowly on,—"sure I'd rather hear you than all the Protestants and members of Parliament, or even Dillon himself. I'll be round to the warehouse in no time, and bring some of the boys with me. But it's a pity—" Here the carriage made a start forward, and Dacre was obliged to leave his friend behind. The little incident had pleased and excited him.

"But I hope you don't mind all this," he said, turning with a quick but very gentle movement to Muriel.

She only laughed.

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"Now we are getting out of the crowd," she said, "I am almost sorry. I wonder where the rival meeting is to be. Ah, here we are, and that is Mr. Maurice's carriage in front of us!"

Mr. Maurice was standing on the pavement, while eager Committeemen and admirers cleared a space in the crowd that was trying to press in at the private door of the warehouse. Two evidently important personages were deferentially trying to catch the great man's words in the hubbub. The crucial point about the return of his carriage being settled, he spoke to his private secretary, who spoke to the footman, and then he passed on with courteous bows, the quietness and reserve in his manner apparently only exciting the crowd still more. Muriel, waiting for her carriage to move, watched him with a renewal of the old pride in him, and a touch of cynicism, in the recognition that pride was the only feeling that he could now excite in her. "How right I was in thinking that he would do great things!" Had he not been also a woman's pupil?

The light shone on the curious irregularity of his sallow features and the fair hair, as he suddenly turned round and saw Lady Cheriton's carriage reaching the door. He spoke to the men near him, and went back with them to insure the space on the pavement being kept clear,—no easy task, as the crowd increased. He gave Muriel his hand, and as she reached the ground, he said in his low, clear undertones:

"So you have brought him yourself?"

As they walked on down a narrow passage, followed at a little distance by Dacre and the Committee, he spoke again.

"Does not all this recall past days? Not at all?"

"Yes," said Lady Cheriton, lightly; "we are getting

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old enough for the pleasures of memory, you and I. But it is the pleasures of such hopes as Mr. Dacre's that we like best to recall."

"Ah, yes," he said quickly; "we would rather think of the hours of hope than of those of attainment."

The private passage ran alongside the huge warehouses, and through its thin partition the noise of the crowd almost drowned their voices. At the farther end, several Primrose League knights and dames were standing together, and some local ladies who had helped in the canvass. Dacre was following with a Catholic member of the Committee, who anxiously confided to him the special local reasons why the Catholic vote was almost entirely radical.

"I am awfully glad you have come," he said in the tired, excited voice that befits the last days before the poll, "but I wish you were an Irishman."

"My grandmother was, and there's a bull to prove the blood."

"Capital," cried the other, "capital! A few of St. Gregory's Club are here. They would all have come to hear you if they had known in time."

Meanwhile the parliamentary candidate was presented to Muriel. He was a red-haired, self-confident, middle-aged man of business, now almost voiceless from the labours of the campaign. Then she spent a few minutes asking questions of the local ladies as to the hopes of success. They eagerly told her their different views, without any of the embarrassment of the Englishwoman on ordinary occasions; the excitement of the moment brought them all together. It was part of the unusual state of things for them to be talking familiarly to the famous Lady Cheriton, whose picture was so well known to them. Muriel had perceived which were the ladies who had come from

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the West End, at the bidding of the League, and which were local, and made her remarks to the latter accordingly.

Mr. Maurice, taking the candidate by the arm, now passed through the door, urged on by Committeemen, and a deafening roar rose on the other side of the partition.

"There's an awfully rowdy lot got in," Muriel heard one of the men with blue rosettes saying, a little anxiously, but this prospect seemed to increase the pleasure of the ladies. Then two eager men begged Lady Cheriton to go on to the platform, and she went into the hall, followed by the rest. Until she had climbed the rough steps that led on to a sort of wide shelf, made to hold sacks of grain, that ran across the warehouse, and that was now used as a platform, Muriel could see nothing.

She found herself in a scene very unlike the political meetings she frequented. The warehouse was enormous, with a dark, cavernous roof, blackened as only London can blacken wood; it was roughly divided by hurdles into two parts, and only one of these had been intended for the meeting. But the crowd had pressed into the other side, whence they could see but little and hear less of what passed on the platform, and had no amusement but that of upsetting the rest. This was one of the initial mistakes in the arrangements. The other, which might prove more serious, but which certainly gave picturesqueness to the scene, was due to the only lights being the enormous, unprotected flaring jets of gas below the platform. They were placed like the footlights of a theatre, only there was nothing more to be turned up between the acts.

Muriel felt a catch at her throat, as she looked down on the strange, Rembrandtesque effect below her. There were no seats in the hall, and the crowd surged up and down to the barrier that kept a few feet's space between it and the

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platform. Instinctively she felt that the scene before her was calculated to inspire radicalism in any one. Penned in the darkness below was the mass of humanity, chiefly made up of the most unfortunate, the worst housed and fed, the worst provided for, body and soul, in this vast empire, while the few ladies and gentlemen, well dressed, exquisitely fed, and with all that could be given to body, mind, and soul, sat in the glare of light on the too high platform above them. Her emotions were with the great surging crowd, whose faces looked ghastly, as the nearest were pressed within radius of the flaring gas only to be pushed back again into the darkness beyond. She had a feeling that nobody cared what happened down there in the dark where women and children might be hurt, seriously, perhaps, if only the votes could be got which would keep such gentlemen as Mr. Maurice in security of power. In her heart, she knew that it was not true, but the effect on the imagination was startling.

A little consultation was going on on the platform. Who should speak first, as in all probability the first speaker would get no hearing at all? The Chairman at last rose, and there was a lull, broken by one or two facetious inquiries as to where he had left his voice or his wig, and who was minding the kids while the missis was on the platform?

He was a good-natured, "h"-less personage, and he chaffed them back again, and told them that the missis's sister was minding the children, and he hoped none of their wives had come out without taking the same precaution. On the whole, he did well, and they understood him, especially when he abused the other side in the time-honoured fashion, which produced some "boohoos" from the enemy present, but was felt to be quite *en règle*.

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The candidate, who was well received, was clearly no speaker, but much might be excused him on the ground of his evident exhaustion. He had been speaking at the rate of five speeches a day for three weeks—so he told them. He was obviously glad to fall back on the presence of the great statesman as an excuse for sitting down.

Mr. Maurice, who was listened to better than was expected, by the crowd in front, and who was calmly patient of the interruptions from the back, gave a businesslike, quite unoratorical statement of proposed Government measures for the benefit of the working man and for the housing of the poor in London. They listened to him, chiefly because they knew he was a great swell and quite a leader in this governing business. Towards the end, and he did not keep them long, two or three voices asked if he were going to tell them about Ireland, and he turned to them, saying:

“That question will be dealt with immediately by a friend of mine, whom I think you know, a Roman Catholic, Mr. Henry Dacre,” and he finished his own point and sat down.

A solitary cheer greeted Henry, as he rose and stepped forward. Muriel turned so as to have a good view of him. Set against the darkness of the cavernous roof beyond, with a glare of light thrown on him from below, the excellent construction of the face bore the test, and he had never looked more handsome; while boyish eagerness and grace and a man’s evident strength of will were combined in him, as they can only be combined for a few years of life.

“Would it be a wonder,” thought Mr. Maurice, whose mind was full of memories this evening, of memories of this same woman in years gone by, as with a faintly sarcastic

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smile he watched Lady Cheriton—"would it be, after all, anything new? Do not women, when they are very young, mercilessly shut down their hearts, and when they find for themselves how little they are paid for the sacrifice, give themselves a little more liberty?"

Henry began to speak, the crowd vociferated; he waited and began again. Muriel passed a few moments of intense anxiety, then she leaned back contented. She had been right in her instinct; the man was a born speaker, a speaker of no mean order of talent.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE FUTURE MEMBER

A NNE was sitting alone in the great, stiff, heavily gilded drawing-room of Lord Cheriton's house.

The room was gorgeously upholstered in red silk, and seemed to breathe a coarse, aristocratic defiance to the higher schools of art that had gone before and had followed its earthy magnificence.

Anne's graceful figure, in the mellowed white satin that did for ordinary evenings at home, looked lonely and alien, leaning back in a huge armchair near the open window. Yet there was a sparkle in her eye and her cheeks were bright with colour; her hand held rather tightly on the gilded lion's head of the arm of the chair, and her lips were firmly set. She was not thinking, only resolving. The time had passed quickly since Henry had left her in the wood the evening before. She had been glad that Jane's rapture of sympathy had necessarily been interrupted by the cares of the move from Cobden. Packing up the babies, who were to be sent to Roger's mother, had been a welcome distraction. It had been a relief, too, to get a wire, saying that Henry could not come down that morning. She did not wish him and Jane to meet yet. She only ticked off, as it were, one of the things she had expected, and did not enquire even to herself whether he could have come or not. Amidst the domestic bustle and intermittent outbursts of sisterly love and rejoicing, and

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the council held together as to the letter to her father, asking his approval of the engagement, the day had passed till Muriel's brougham came to take her up to London. The footman had a note to bring her:

DEAREST ANNE :

I am longing to see you to tell you my joy. Meanwhile I am so sorry to have to leave you to dine alone to-night. I am going to take Mr. Dacre down to the meeting, as I think I may be a link between him and some of the people on the platform. I have ordered your dinner at eight and our supper at ten. I shall be as good a reporter for you as I can.

Ever yours,

MURIEL.

P. S.—I quite understand that you wish the engagement to be kept secret till you have your father's consent. Of course you are quite right.

Anne felt annoyed at the note. If ladies were to be at the meeting, could they not have telegraphed to her in the morning to come up for it? What could have interested her more? Then there was the pain of something unexpected this time; she had thought that Henry depended much on her sympathy, and also on her judgment as to his work and aims. Had he not even wished to have her present, to listen to him at the meeting? She was not angry; it was all of a piece with the fears and doubts she could not drown, though she tried not to dwell on them; only this particular symptom was an indication which she had not expected.

While she had an unappreciated masterpiece of a little dinner alone, and wondered nervously if Lord Cheriton could be in the house, and looked at the evening paper, and drank her coffee, her resolves were forming inarticulately within her. She would not be critical, nor suspicious of every little thing, warping her own judgment by imagin-

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ing slights and neglects; she would be bright and affectionate, asking for nothing that she did not receive, and thus, as peacefully as she could, wait and watch. Otherwise, she might just miss her happiness from too great anxiety to be sure of it. Then, too, nobody need suspect her pain, if there were pain that she must pass through, however great. After all, if she were not quite rightly treated, if she were neglected and slighted for a time, was it more than many wives put up with from a sense of duty? Could not Anne do as much for a little while, for love? This was all supposing that her fears were true; and had she any right, even the shadow of a right, to criticise him yet? So she turned resolutely to the evening paper, and was absorbed enough in an article in *The Westminster Gazette* not to hear anything till Muriel walked into the room, and she knew that Henry must be following.

"Here she is," cried Muriel, joyfully, and, hurrying forward, she kissed her cousin with more warmth than Anne could have thought possible. Anne fancied her eyes were moist. Then Muriel moved, with a pretty touch of discreetness, down the room to leave them to meet alone.

Henry followed hurriedly, his face aglow with joy, his head erect, and coming up to Anne, he caught the white hand, with its long, taper fingers, and kissed it with a gentle reverence that seemed to offer her all that could be given,—all that he as a man meant and could be. He stood one moment looking at her, and Anne met his eyes with the bright, confiding look of her own. Then she said quickly:

"How has it gone off?"

"I think it has been a success," he answered in a most confident voice.

"Oh," cried Muriel, "you should have been there,

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Anne; it was grand. Mr. Maurice was quite delighted. I had no idea,"—Muriel was looking at Henry as she spoke,—"that you could speak like that."

She walked across the room and back, her long summer cloak floating about her.

"He simply carried them away with him, and they cheered frantically. It was in a huge, empty warehouse, and they were nearly all standing; there was no real platform, but a sort of ledge against one end, and on this there were Mr. Maurice and the local committee, with their funny fat wives. But, Anne, the faces, oh, the white and black faces, where one could see them as they came near the lights, and the sense of a dense crowd of those same haggard faces in the blackness behind! Oh, it was exciting; it was awful! I felt half wild to help them, and yet to fight them, too. For they shrieked at him. For a long time they would n't let him speak, after he got on the Irish question. I wondered you could keep your head as you did."

"And what did he say?" asked Anne.

"Ah, that's too large an order," said Henry, turning quickly from watching Lady Cheriton as she walked and talked; "you shall read it," smiling at Anne, "or I will inflict it on you to-morrow. But if supper is allowed now——"

So to supper they went, and talked the while, much in the same way, Muriel and Henry describing, and Anne listening.

When they came up again, Horace Colquhoun sauntered in and came to greet Anne.

"Where is Cheriton?" asked Muriel; "has he come in?"

"Yes and no. We came in together after dinner, and

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he has just gone to the Travellers'. I stayed to see Lady Anne before I followed him."

There was the usual tone of almost paternal kindness in Horace's voice, as he began asking her many questions as to her brother, and Jane, and Jane's husband, and even the babies.

"Just as usual," she wrote to her sister, afterwards; "he would not cross the street to call upon any of us, and I was convinced at the moment of his being one of our most intimate friends."

Meanwhile Muriel, leaning on a screen, regardless of the pressure of the gilded arms of the Cheriton family against her elbows, was talking earnestly, in a low voice, to Dacre. Twenty minutes, half an hour and more, and still Colquhoun asked questions and received bright answers, and still the low murmur of Muriel's voice continued, when she said aloud:

"Well, then, we will take them into our counsels at once. Anne, Horace, come here. I have something to speak to you about. Won't you stop talking, and come here?"

"I thought we were most discreet," said Horace, coming forward with his little trotting step, and putting up his glass with an air of expectancy. "Come, Lady Anne, we are to be admitted behind scenes."

Anne laughed, and asked if they were to swear on the poker.

"No," said Muriel, "your honour is above suspicion. But this really is serious. Horace, *you* know, but Anne does n't, that we are going to have an election for our division, as old Mr. Snead is retiring. Well, now comes the point. Mr. Maurice has suggested to me to-night that Mr. Dacre should be the Conservative candidate."

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Henry's eyes sought Anne's for sympathy, and Muriel looked to Colquhoun, and then flushed slightly.

"Why not?" she said imperiously.

"My dear lady, give me time to speak," answered Horace. "It seems to me an admirable idea. I met Maurice's secretary just now, and he is full of your meeting to-night; says he never heard a thing better done." Then, looking in Dacre's direction, "Shall I tell you what his chief said to him afterwards? 'The Roman Church has missed a great pulpit orator,'" and Horace beamed on them genially. "My dear Dacre, this is splendid. M.P. for the Cheriton division of Downshire. We really ought to move a vote of thanks to old Snead for retiring in the nick of time."

"Take care," said Muriel, quickly, for he spoke in a loud voice, and a servant was already in the room. He brought a card from Lord Cheriton to Colquhoun, asking if he were coming or not, as he would not wait at the club for him any longer.

"I must be off."

"But you will come and talk this over in the morning?"

"Of course," said Horace, and ambled away.

Muriel was looking white and tired as he left them, and Henry had a frown on his face. Anne divined that he did not like the pulpit orator comparison.

"Do you think my speech was too like a sermon?"

"Nonsense!" said Muriel. "Oh, how tired I am! Come, Anne, we must adjourn the debate and go to bed." Then, holding out her hand to Henry: "I do believe it will all come right."

Pausing on the upstairs landing, she kissed Anne as they separated.

"I am so glad, dearest; I think you will be so happy.

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I wish I were not too tired to talk to-night, but we shall have plenty of time."

But Anne had an instinct as she turned into her room alone that even if there were plenty of time—and when did Muriel ever find plenty of time for a quiet talk?—she would not say much more than that about the engagement. Indeed, in the days that followed, Muriel did not dwell on the subject. She took for granted easily that, as they were engaged of their own will and seeking, and not for worldly motives, they would be sure to live happily ever afterwards. It was quite delightful that Henry should marry her favourite cousin. But perhaps it needs a larger heart than Muriel had yet attained, to stand and watch happiness, or what she took to be happiness, without a yearning that it would be both untrue and harsh to call jealousy,—which resembles jealousy "only as the mist resembles the rain."

Henry was fond of walking in the silent streets of the City, overshadowed by their great dome. To-night he shrank from the club and other people, smoking and talking, and from the closeness of his own rooms. Coming out of the big gates of the Cheritons' house in Grosvenor Square he walked quickly away from the West End with long, impatient strides. He felt a peculiar sense of irritation and disappointment. Was it only that little shaft of Colquhoun's as to the lost popular preacher? Yes, certainly, that was annoying. Would that always be the man of the world's attitude towards him, because he was a Catholic—speaking of him kindly and patronisingly—"not bad for a foreigner, that speech was quite a fine thing in its own way; he would make a good preacher?" That was irritating, but he must not make too much of it. Dizzy had

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had worse cold water to put up with than that. He was sure he could master that tone, and bring those men to acknowledge his powers. What hurt was seated deeper. It was his want of enjoyment in his first successes. For surely, though on a small scale, the evening which had ended in Mr. Maurice suggesting him as a member for Cheriton, and speaking so strongly of his speech, was in itself a success, and promised more. What was the matter with him? he asked dumbly of the silent streets and the stars that were so pale above the street lamps. Was it merely the old, old moral of disgust in accomplishment, brought on, apparently, by some pin-prick like Colquhoun's, but going further? Did the heart that expanded with the warmth and glow of success, and men's admiration, and the first taste of power over them, only reveal thereby its huge, hungry capacities for more? What would satisfy it, with its craving for more and more achievement, and yet the fatigue of body and mind from having even got so far—its vast empty moral spaces asking to be filled, and its surface sensitiveness, the slave of any pin-prick?

Silent and still was Amen Court. No echo broke the stillness of the Strand, as Henry trod the pavements alone, and coming "to a deep heart," counted over all the things that to-night seemed flat and stale, not forgetting his engagement with Anne and the loss of the emotion he had known when he had spoken to her in the wood. Love, then, was among the things that he had tried and found wanting.

He paused as the silence was broken by the city clocks striking the monotonous four quarters, and, like a man roused from sleep, he vaguely wondered what hour of the night they were about to record.

"One, only one." He felt as if it ought to be later, and mechanically took out his watch to see if it held the same

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opinion. Then he lit a cigar and began to turn towards his rooms, acknowledging that he was tired, mind and body, and therefore discounting the melancholy of his reflections.

"When I have had a good sleep, things will seem more worth while," he thought. "Anything can be analysed to death. It is only such fortunate men as I am that can afford to pick themselves to pieces," and his mind went back to Lady Cheriton's self-analysis that evening during their drive. What a pathos it added to his conception of her! The ideal of a great, beautiful, inspiring woman; the influence before which it seemed that so many bowed.

At first he remembered that he had, after the visit to the Murdocks', and when still under the influence of Colquhoun's insinuations, half blamed her for the attraction she had for him, ready, as men and women often are when first brought among a set of human beings that are strange to them, to see subtle meanings and intentions in little things. He had felt, he remembered with a smile, as if he ought to resist something that threatened to be a strong and untrustworthy influence. Now—and he glanced up at the summer's night, radiant above the gas-lit city—he had proved his friend. He knew from experience that she was not light and fickle. She was beautiful, and many men would be at her feet if she chose, but she had not an ordinary woman's vanity. She had not a woman's vanity, yet she had eminently a woman's heart, made more tender and kind by patient suffering. How good she was to himself, how sweet and sisterly to Anne!

There was a brightness in his face, as he walked slowly onwards, back to the West End; all gloom had gone, as he fancied himself again in his friend's society. He dressed her in his fancy picture in the dim dust colours he had seen

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her wear that first night in London, and the faded rose-coloured cloak she had worn at the meeting floated about her; her eyes were sad, but kind, and the mouth, that had little lines of pain about it, smiled encouragement and confidence at him.

CHAPTER XIX

LADY CHERITON INTERRUPTS

WHEN Dacre woke next morning he felt a slight sense of oppression, though he did not at once see why. Then he remembered that he was to be with Anne at twelve o'clock. He was to see her alone, so Lady Cheriton had said, in a sitting-room that had been set aside for Lady Anne's use. He sighed, though why he sighed he hardly knew. Something of the feeling came over him which he had known as a child when his mother had told him that he was to be allowed to come to a specially long service on a great feast-day. No want of reverence, but a fatigued sense of want of fervour in himself. Why had the glow of that hour in the wood at Cobden died down so quickly? That, too, he had known in religious emotions. It was only the insufficiency in himself that he had felt this morning. It was annoying, too, that he could not make up his mind to tell her that he had failed to go to Holy Communion the day before. Poor Anne, how little she would have wished him to attribute a bit of the mentor, to his picture of the guardian angel!

It was symptomatic of his mental condition, that neither then nor afterwards had he any definite picture of married life before him. He had a much more definite picture of Dacre, the statesman, in his outlook, than of Dacre, the husband of Lady Anne. Perhaps there was an unconscious chivalry in his hesitation to dwell on the future results of

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his engagement. Or was it because a strong, secret action in the unconscious working of mind and heart produces a kind of torpor in the regions of consciousness? While he breakfasted, and during the course of a busy morning, his thoughts ran entirely on the meeting of the evening before, and by half-past eleven he had almost forgotten Anne. Then he hurried off to Grosvenor Square, and found her in the room at the back of Lady Cheriton's boudoir, just come in from Mass, in her usual white muslin dress and a black hat. The hot weather suited her, and more than one glance of admiration had followed her in her short morning walk. As they were left alone by the retiring footman, with the length of a large room between them, a sudden and overwhelming embarrassment seized Dacre, and he needed an extraordinary effort to command himself before he could join her at the window. She was standing, only half turned towards him, and he trusted that she had seen nothing in his face of this most unaccountable awkwardness before he stood by her. As he met her eyes and looked into her face, the awkwardness left him as suddenly as it had come. Something in her made him feel that she was still the friend to whom he had been talking for weeks past, in the summer evenings at Cobden: and the comfortable sense of her presence came back to him, and he shook hands with her as naturally and as warmly as if no engagement existed between them. Anne gave him back his smile of sympathy and comradeship, telling herself that she was glad, though a little startled at the nature of his greeting. It was the first time that they had been alone together since the great moments at Cobden.

"Well, how are you after last night's excitements?" she asked, turning from him into the room; and, sitting down with her back to the light, she went on: "Are you very

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tired? Too tired to tell me all about it?" He moved to a chair near her, and instantly fell into what she needed of him, telling her everything, even to his fears beforehand, and to the disillusion after the success. Anne was almost too good a listener for Henry, too much a mental mirror, charming at the moment, but receiving, not giving impressions. This had not been so at Cobden, but no doubt there was a tension in her nerves now that lessened the freshness of her mind.

At length he felt that he had talked quite enough of himself. The glow on his face faded a little as he turned towards her. "I am so glad that you are here," he said, glancing, as he spoke, with a sort of shyness at the light hair that clustered round her white forehead. Anne, feeling his eyes on her, did not respond. She turned to smell a glorious bunch of red roses from Cheriton, in a bowl by her side. He came nearer. "As we could not always live in that wood at Cobden, Anne,—" he continued, very gently, and paused, lingering on her name.—Yes, he felt now that the glamour was coming back to him, and he welcomed it, almost too eagerly. Still, perhaps, it was too much as if she were some sacred image in a shrine, despite the dawning of a warm human joy in his heart.—"Could n't we go down there one day soon?" He knelt by her as he spoke, and took her hand, still seeking the blue eyes. But the questioning light in them, like a gleam trying to win its way through mists, he could not read. A sense of inquiry, almost of anxiety, was breaking on him; but fear and doubt had no time to become articulate, for the door from the boudoir opened, and he sprang up.

"I 'm so sorry to interrupt you," said Lady Cheriton's low, soft voice, "but it is something important, and I could

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not wait any longer. Sir Thomas Turton is here, and I think we should not miss the chance. I left him in the drawing-room. You know him, Anne," and Muriel sank back in a chair as she spoke, looking tired but eager. "You see, Henry, he is an awful and really astonishing bore, but he is one of the Cheriton members, and even old Snead has not been member as long as Sir Thomas. He has got it into his head that he is the leading influence in the county, and as nobody else poses in that rôle, he is quite happy. Now, although he never ceases talking, he can keep a secret, so I want you to let me tell him ours."

Henry was all attention. "If you really think it wise, so soon," he said.

"Well," Muriel went on, "I am anxious to make sure of him before his wife hears anything about it. She hates Romanism, in a really old-fashioned, sound way, and she does n't love me. So he must commit himself before she knows anything about it. I'll go down to him, and will you come when I send for you? He will be enchanted to be the first person consulted. Stay and talk with Anne till then," and she left them, her long skirts sounding on the staircase.

"Is n't she splendid!" said Henry, half to himself, as he slipped into the deep chair in which Lady Cheriton had been sitting. "Do you know she told me last night that you were her favourite cousin"; and the quarter of an hour sped away as he talked of Lady Cheriton.

And again Anne was as good, as sympathetic a listener as ever.

Then he was sent for, and with a bright smile of humour and understanding, he said quickly: "We shall meet at luncheon, after this most important interview," and followed the summoning footman.

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Anne sprang up from her seat and saying half aloud: "That dressmaker will be sick of waiting," ran off to her room. She knew instinctively that this morning was typical of what her visit to London would be. There would be nothing consecutive, nothing uninterrupted, nothing into which a busy, tired, outside life would not intrude. Muriel Cheriton's own way of life gave the tone to those around her. It was a life, Anne knew, of extraordinary system, of untiring effort for great ends, but for small ends also. There would be people to luncheon, meetings in the East End or the West, people at tea, big parties in the evening, individuals of all classes who must have a word alone, filling up the gaps, and dressmakers always upstairs, or things on approval waiting below, and a constant changing of clothes that must be always appropriate. Nobody in Muriel's house was kept waiting if its mistress could avoid it; no letter was unanswered, no appeal carelessly dismissed. Anne had often wondered at it all; now her mind ached, and she longed for even the dull routine under the commonplace step-mother. Surely, in life at Massingham there was some room for the silent, moral growths on which life depends, some sunshine in God's unspoiled world, at least for the feelers of the heart to grow in strength and vitality. Oh, this busy, modern, uneasy, deeply engaged world! Did it not, with all its charity, all its humanity, tread very easily but with crushing power on hearts that must harden under its pressure? How could she hope that, with everything she had to think of, Muriel would understand? After all, Anne devoutly hoped that she would not understand. Then, too, the bustle of the season, the never being alone, made it easier to conceal thought, gave an easier vantage-ground for observation. All that Anne wanted to know would surely very soon

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become clear now. What was the use of hoping for growth if there was no root? If only she could be spared such pain as she had felt that morning! Must she be knelt to, gazed at, talked to, at one moment, as if a man's whole soul went out to her, and the next be forgotten? At one moment be shaken hands with, like a man friend and comrade, at another flush from kisses on the same hand, devout and eager kisses like those of last night? Was it that he loved her more than he knew, or less? She was sure that he was not a mere flirt—but was it that love was so new to him that he hardly seemed able to deal with it? A flirt might behave as Henry did.—Or did he act so from mere youthfulness? He was so young—so absurdly young. And as Anne came in late for luncheon, a slightly tremulous but almost motherly smile was the end of all the useless thinking that had underlain her important business with the dressmaker.

Sir Thomas Turton sprang up to greet her effusively, and he was so big, and his greeting so considerable, that Anne seemed to stumble under its attack into the chair beside him. Her hope that Lady Turton was quite well became a conversational event, as did also Sir Thomas's enquiries for Lady Jane and "her good husband."

Then, tripping across the vast space from the door to the round table by the window, which Lady Cheriton always used for luncheon, came Colquhoun.

"Yes, Cheriton is lunching at the Travellers'. Good-morning, Lady Anne. Ah, Turton, glad to see you! How's her ladyship? Flourishing, as usual? You have been introduced to the rising statesman—no, no, not that, that's too rich, the fish will do, the rising statesman, Mr. Henry Dacre? I was just thinking that he ought to know you. He knows Maurice already," and adjusting

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his eyeglass in a way that implied a wink to the rest of the company, Horace beamed on Sir Thomas.

"I'm sure," said Sir Thomas, "any little result of forty years' experience of the House of Commons that might benefit Mr. Dacre is absolutely at his disposal."

"Ah, but then he is not there yet," Horace went on; "and you're not of much use in advising men how to get there. You've always had a walk over, you know."

"But Sir Thomas has helped so many other people in the good cause," said Lady Cheriton.

"Well, I should not have ventured to suggest that experience myself if Lady Cheriton had not done it for me," said Sir Thomas, giving a big laugh of enjoyment. "I may say, I suppose, without boasting, that a good many of our members are kind enough to tell me that they would never have been in the House at all if it had not been for me."

Happy Sir Thomas! Flattered and petted, grazing on the most delicate viands, absorbing champagne with the smiles of beauty and rank! No wonder he forgot many things—forgot the Protestant Association, and most of all forgot the look of Lady Turton's small firm mouth. "You see," he said in a low voice to Henry, as they smoked together, his fine, manly figure protruding over the rug on which they stood, "under the circumstances, poor thing, you know, she naturally leans a good deal on me. She always sends for me if she is in any little difficulty at Cheriton; but of course you know, the whole position is rather delicate." And with a wave of his cigarette, he indicated his feelings towards the absent master of the house.

CHAPTER XX

LORD CHERITON IS NOT PLEASED

IT was past one in the morning, and Lord Cheriton and Colquhoun, in excellent humour, were counting the gains, for they had won heavily that night, having had in company several ardent and inexperienced youths. They were not actually, only mentally, counting out gold and silver, in the long, low, luxuriously furnished smoking-room that ran out behind the house in Grosvenor Square, and had a separate little entrance hall and exit of its own, through the stables.

Lord Cheriton was a short, stout, bald, well-dressed, and well-groomed man of about fifty; in face and figure a blurred and over-coloured sketch of the handsome man, as men were reckoned handsome under the fourth George. Even in the way he lounged back in the deep armchair there was something in the attitude that told of a man of fastidious personal habits, who would require a relay of skilled hirelings to tend him exquisitely, from the perfuming of the few reddish hairs left on his head, to the polishing of the gouty nails on the large white hands.

Colquhoun, from the days when they were boys together at Eton, had been the self-constituted mental attendant of Lord Cheriton, guarding him from boredom in every possible way. Himself of good family, it had seemed to Horace an exceedingly interesting thing to be the chosen

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chum of a youth destined to so much more greatness than he was; and a genuine affection had grown in the boy's heart, to which was given a nobler basis of gratitude, as Cheriton, before he succeeded to his father's wealth, embroiled himself with Israelites to pay Horace's debts as well as his own. However it had come about, they had become inseparables; and though Horace had made an effort at a life of his own, and joined the diplomatic service, he soon threw it up, and returned to the ennobling kind of existence which he still led. He had rooms of his own, tradesmen of his own, friends of his own; but the rooms were of great use to Lord Cheriton, the tradesmen were paid by Lord Cheriton, and the friends were never allowed to interfere with his patron's convenience.

Horace, having at last exhausted the topic of the evening's game, and the folly of one poor youth who had been comically torn between conscience and the gambler's fever, paused for a moment. He was lying at full length on a sofa before the empty fireplace, caressing the long hair of a King Charles spaniel that had curled itself between him and the cushions.

"Have you seen her ladyship to-day?" enquired Lord Cheriton in the tone of sarcasm with which he usually alluded to his wife, when alone with Colquhoun.

"Yes, I saw her at lunch this morning. She has Lady Anne staying with her."

"Really, I did not know," was the answer; "has Jane come, too, and the babies?"

"No; only Lady Anne; you know I told you that her ladyship intended to take her cousin out this season."

"It gives an additional touch of respectability to the house in which I have the honour to live," said Cheriton,

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and Horace laughed. "Has she spoken to you again about the stables at Cheriton?"

"No," said Horace; "she knows when she is beaten, and I don't think she ever turns back to the last chapter. As a rule she is too busy with the present one."

"Then she won't speak to me about it?" said Cheriton, a little nervously.

"No, I am pretty sure she won't; she has got something else on hand. Has it struck you that she has changed lately?"

"No," said Cheriton, promptly, conscious, as he spoke, that it was a very long time indeed since he had looked at his wife enough to observe any changes of countenance.

"I think, old fellow," said Colquhoun, slowly, "that you were a little beforehand with your jeers about the bet."

Cheriton laughed.

"My dear Horace, you don't mean to say that you have still got that seven thousand in your mind? This is really too good," and he rubbed together the fat white hands, that somehow were suggestive of red velvet cushions and port wine, and leaned back in his chair, as if Horace had surpassed himself in his powers of wit.

Horace waited, and then said carelessly:

"Has it ever struck you as odd that Lady Cheriton has never fallen in love?"

Muriel's husband laughed again, still more loudly.

"Really, Horace, since when have you taken to indulging your imagination like this? It would be an unhoped-for exit indeed."

But Horace thought he detected a little nervous query in the face, all the same.

"Remember, you see so little of her."

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"I saw enough of her at one time to know that she is as hard as steel, and loves, and can love, no one but herself," said Cheriton, bitterly.

"Ah, well, then that settles it," said Horace. "We will say no more about it,—only I think you 'll find a change. See the way she has taken this affair about the stables at the Abbey—as quietly as a lamb. I had an instinct that if we could make her give up the reins there, and take her proper place, she would be much more likely to throw up the whole show, and leave you free."

"And you seven thousand pounds?" said Cheriton, roughly.

Colquhoun looked a little ruffled.

"No, no, old boy," said the other, almost affectionately, and Horace went on:

"But I did think she would have shown some spirit for Holmstead's sake, as well as to keep her hand in. But she did n't, and now," Horace jumped up and stood with his back to the fireplace, and waved his hands expressively. "Call no woman clever till you see the end. She is going to cut Cheriton in the county of Downshire from under her feet, with her own hands. She is going to ask the division to accept as a candidate a young Roman Catholic they never heard of in their lives before, this Dacre whom all the women have gone cracked about for love of his *beaux yeux*. Educated in some religious college, cut out for the rôle of fashionable Jesuit preacher, he is to be member for dear old English Protestant Tory Cheriton. What do you say to that?"

"I say," said his friend, spluttering with wrath, "that I won't have it; I won't allow such impertinence; I will assert myself. I will——"

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"My dear fellow," said Colquhoun, "you are perfectly in the right, undeniably in the right, but I strongly advise you to leave the whole thing alone. It will come to nothing; let her cut her own throat. Anyhow, wait till they come and ask you to interfere."

He paused expressively, for he knew it would be a very long time before the Downshire Conservatives would come to such a pass as that.

"But I can forbid her to do it."

"By all means," said Colquhoun; "forbid anything you like. You might succeed, there's no knowing, but don't count on me to do any of the talking. I think it is an excellent thing."

Cheriton sat looking helplessly in front of him. He knew he should end by taking Colquhoun's advice and leaving it all alone; he always did end that way, but he did n't like it—he had not liked any of Horace's talk that evening. He was putting two and two together, in a heavy whisky-and-watery fashion of his own.

"Have I ever seen this Dacre?" he asked.

"Do you remember a youth you found in my room a few days ago, tall and dark? I told you he was Biddulph's secretary."

"He was d——d handsome," said Cheriton, sulkily.
"Well, I, for one, am going to bed."

CHAPTER XXI

ANNE SEES LORD CHERITON

M R. BIDDULPH was shown into the long drawing-room in Grosvenor Square, a few nights later.

Anne came forward to greet him, her face full of pleasure. He shook hands with her with cordiality, even emotion, but did not speak for a moment. Then, after he had sat down in the highest chair within range, he smiled humorously, but his voice shook a little.

"I came to congratulate you," he said, "but I don't seem to do it very well."

Anne was greatly touched, but she did not find it easy to respond at once. She was getting accustomed, she told herself, to a more superficial treatment of her engagement.

"No doubt he is much more lucky than he deserves," Biddulph went on, in a matter-of-course manner, "but I can congratulate you too. He ought to do great things; he is suffering rather much just now from a disease we will call megalomania. But I like that in youth. In short, Lady Anne, I like your young man immensely, and I hope you won't take him away from me."

He gave a shake of satisfaction at having got through his little speech so well.

"No, indeed," she cried; "I am so thankful that he is with you"; then, anxious to do away with the effect of words that might have betrayed anxiety, she went on,

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laughing: "But what is the disease you spoke of? I don't understand."

"Well, 'ambition' means something commoner; it won't do for it," he answered; "but it is a kind of craze for doing and being big things. Nothing wins one's sympathy more, but still it is a craze; and although it is the craze of saints and heroes, it is risky, for it tends to confuse means with ends. I have known people suffering under megalomania do very little things indeed. *He won't*," he added hastily; and then half to himself, "but you never quite know what line it will take; it may make him melancholy if he does n't get on quick enough."

Anne was silent. What he said fitted in so well with her own thoughts.

"I am lucky to find you alone," said Biddulph, with the old-fashioned courtesy that was only roused by his favourites. "But where is Lady Cheriton?"

"She and Henry are dining with Lady Rusfield."

Anne said it quite simply, and was surprised to see his brow darken.

"Lady Rusfield told Muriel yesterday that one of her men had failed, so Muriel asked if she might bring Henry, as she wants him to meet Mr. Forrest and another Downshire member who she thinks would be useful."

"I did not think she would dine with Lady Rusfield," said Biddulph, roughly; "she is a bad woman, as bad as they are turned out in London. I did not think Lady Cheriton would go there, and take the boy. It's not like her. This sort of excitement and rushing at a plan regardless of consequences will weaken her influence. She is one of the few women in London who have really kept up a high standard in these things." He was silent for a mo-

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ment, and his large brow was drawn into deep frowning lines. Then his face softened as he turned to Anne. "Besides, they are leaving you alone. It is nonsense, preposterous nonsense."

There are men who have the unfair advantage of using ordinary words with as much force as any bad language, and Biddulph, though he was not always content with fusing his commonplace adjectives with wrath, could do it admirably. He paused, and Anne began to explain.

"Muriel has not been there before, but she knew that Mr. Forrest and the other member were to be there, and she wanted to talk to them about the election."

"Nonsense," fumed Mr. Biddulph, "she ought to have asked them to come here."

"But it is awkward," pleaded Anne, "because Lord Cheriton is here, and they won't meet."

Mr. Biddulph grunted, and Anne felt as if she were a Sunday-school child who was being scolded because the others had not come.

"Then she ought to go down to Cheriton to see them; anyhow, she ought not to dine with Lady Rusfield, and Dacre ought not to have gone with her."

Anne flushed at this conclusion, and he laughed.

"Don't think it necessary to defend him," he said; "probably he does not know much about Lady Rusfield, and it is different for a man. Besides, I know from a shameful experience how often I have gone against my better judgment at your cousin's bidding."

Anne laughed, and Biddulph, to change the subject, enquired after Lady Jane, and drew Anne on to tell anecdotes of the beloved little Muriel, listening with a genuine pleasure and sense of amusement.

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Biddulph did not stay many minutes longer, for he fancied that he heard Lady Cheriton's carriage reach the door, and he did not wish to be caught and talked into a good humour with her.

Quite a week had passed since Anne had written to her father, asking his consent to her engagement, and she was beginning to think that he and her step-mother must have left Florence, when a letter from him arrived one morning, as she was breakfasting with Muriel. On opening it, a slightly faint, sick sensation came over her, such as some people feel in smelling lilies. She had felt it once before, while being congratulated on her engagement, by Mr. Biddulph. Her step-mother's anxiety that she should marry was no secret to her, and she had several times already pictured Lady Massingham's relief and half-suppressed joy at the approaching end of her responsibility. But to Anne's surprise, the letter, though gracious, and to herself affectionate, was not one that she could easily show to Henry. What crotchet had taken her father, or what imaginary eldest son of great wealth had seemed necessary to his idea of his pretty daughter's future, it was difficult to say. Anne flushed at the magnificent tone of the letter, and could hardly believe that Lord Massingham was withholding his approval until he should return to England.

I do not ask you [he said], to alter anything that has passed between you and Mr. Dacre, only I must beg you to consider nothing as finally determined, and I need not add that the engagement must not be made known to any of the family connections before my return.

Anne gave the letter to Muriel, saying: "As you al-

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ready know all about it, I think father would rather you should read this."

"My dear!" cried Muriel, in astonishment. "Why, you will soon have two thousand a year of your own, and he has already, I suppose, five or six hundred!" Then she sat silently reading the letter once more. "Pomposity and love of power gone mad," she thought. "It is dreadful when a man's faults crystallise and harden as he gets older." But to Anne she said:

"I am sure it will be all right when he does come back," and then they were both silent.

Anne's instinct had told her to give Muriel the letter at once, but she could not discuss it. Before they had finished breakfast, Henry Dacre was shown into the dining-room. He looked worried, and after a hasty greeting to them both, began at once to Lady Cheriton:

"A tiresome thing has happened. Here is a paragraph from a Downshire paper saying that *you* have nominated me member for the Cheriton division! It is really very spiteful."

Muriel seized the cutting, read the paragraph, and sat back in her chair, with a frown on her beautiful face.

"I wonder who has done this," she mused. "It is cleverly contrived, and about the worst thing that could have happened."

"It is most unfortunate," said Henry.

Muriel rose, gathered up her letters, and stood by the open window without speaking. In a difficulty she always required time for reflection in solitude. "How long can you stay?" she said at length, turning to Dacre.

"I need not go for half an hour," he replied, looking as his watch. "Biddulph is out of London."

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"Come to me in my sitting-room in twenty minutes. Anne has a letter she will want to tell you about."

Sheer concentration of thought on the matter in hand—the all-important election—made Muriel forget that Anne might not wish to plunge at once into the question of the embarrassing letter. Henry opened the door, saying earnestly as Muriel passed him:

"I do trust that you will not let this worry you. I've not really set my heart on being elected, and I would infinitely rather give the whole thing up than that you—" He looked very ardent and chivalrous, and Muriel was touched.

"No, no," she interrupted, laying her hand lightly on his shoulder; "it will come all right. I rather like obstacles when I have made up my mind to a thing."

He stood quite still for a moment, as if transfixed by the touch of her hand on his shoulder; then he started, closed the door, and walked down the long room to the window. Anne was still sitting at the table.

"You wanted to speak to me about a letter," he said absently, looking out of the window as he spoke. His face had on it the grey, worn look that came over it sometimes now; and it brought out the strength and beauty, the fineness of outline, and nobility of expression that so immeasurably attracted Anne.

She did not answer, though she was looking at him, wishing she hardly knew what,—only that they were n't there alone together just then, that his face had less power over her, that the long, nervous, muscular hands were not so expressive—or if all these things must be so, if she must be for ever beating the air, for ever fighting against something too vague and elusive for definite thought, that he

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might either be put away from her altogether, or that—She leaned her elbows on the table, and buried her face in her hands. Should she try now to put him away from her? Should she say more than the letter said, exaggerate her father's want of approval, and tell him that they must part?

"I am afraid that you are distressed." His voice was quite gentle, and seemed, as it came to her, to speak all the human love and tenderness that his face so often lacked: and the temptation passed from her.

"Yes," she replied, "I have had a tiresome letter from my father. He makes difficulties about money and things. It is a stupid letter—a very stupid letter," she added almost tearfully.

"He does not think me good enough for you, and of course he is right." Henry was not thinking of himself personally, but his pride had instantly adverted to his family. Did Lord Massingham know how it had dwindled in wealth and importance, till there was little to distinguish the Dacres from the yeoman farmers of the north? He was keenly sensitive regarding the position to which his Dacre grandfather had sunk, and he asked himself now, whether Lord Massingham had ever met the red-faced, swearing, squire-farmer. If so, that would account for his holding back. Henry had more than once come across this annoying recollection of his grandfather among older men, and it was a sore point—one of those irrationally sore points that are so hard to cure or to conceal. Anne was not aware of this weakness.

"Nonsense," she exclaimed. "It's only the money. But surely we should be all right on two thousand a year, Henry?"

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Henry was not thinking of the future in a sufficiently concrete way to be interested in Anne's two thousand a year, and ignoring her remark, he asked:

"Does he know anything about us?—about the Dacres, I mean? What did you say to him?"

"Oh, he is sure to know all about the Dacres," she cried. "There is n't an old Catholic family in England that he and my step-mother don't know all about."

"Will you show me the letter?"

Anne handed it to him, and watched him read it, saw his lips tighten and his nostrils quiver a little, and the impatient movement of his hands as he turned over the pages. His voice seemed to come from a distance, when he at last spoke.

"Of course, we must do as your father wishes; nobody thought for a moment of announcing our engagement till he came home. I had no wish to hurry you into a poor marriage. It is a letter that he ought not to have written —unless—" Happily he was too chivalrous to finish the sentence—"unless your letter was very badly expressed" was in his mind.

Seeing that he was on the point of losing his temper, Anne, with a woman's instinct to soothe, said gently:

"I don't think he meant the letter to be disagreeable. It is pompous and old-fashioned; but he will not make real difficulties."

"Perhaps not."

The clock on the mantelpiece struck half-past ten.

"You will be late for Muriel," exclaimed Anne.

He gave a start, and took a hasty leave of her.

"How idiotic of Muriel to make me show him that letter just when he was so much annoyed about the election!"

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thought Anne. "But it was silly of the poor dear to be so sensitive."

Somehow, the episode was not altogether unpleasing to her. There had been very little incident in their relations, so far.

"He quite forgot the time, and he won't have five minutes with Muriel to discuss that paragraph. Who could have put it in?"

Just as they were sitting down to luncheon with a number of visitors, including the faithful Colquhoun, a note was brought to Anne. It said:

DEAR ANNE:

I am ashamed, and want to tell you so at once. Something revived a tiresome memory, and I was irritable and inexcusable.

Waiting to be forgiven, your devoted

HENRY DACRE.

A happy blush lit up her face, and excited Colquhoun's curiosity.

"Do you want anything in Paris, Lady Anne?"

"In Paris? No—why?" she asked with a radiant smile.

"Because I am going there with Cheriton, in two or three days. Didn't you know?"

"Oh, yes, but I'd quite forgotten. How stupid of me! Would you really get me some gloves?"

"Delighted, if you will give me the address of the shop. By the way, Lady Cheriton, could you make one reform while I'm away? I want the hall door made larger. I was nearly jammed this morning—there were three messenger boys coming out, three telegraph boys going in, your secretary, the telephone lady, and the shorthand writer. It is too much for any door."

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"Nonsense," said Muriel; "I have only sent four telegrams this morning, and I have n't got a telephonist."

Anne had noticed before that this sort of joke usually flattered Muriel on a weak point in her vanity. To-day she was not responsive to any of Mr. Colquhoun's conversation, though it was most carefully selected to give satisfaction.

The night before Lord Cheriton started for Paris, Anne saw him for the first time, and the encounter was rather an awkward one. She had just finished dressing for the Court ball, and was coming down-stairs rather cautiously for fear of catching dust on her new gown—when, looking down, she saw Lord Cheriton on the next landing. She did not know that he never came to this part of the house, but she felt at once that his presence was unusual. He was standing behind a pillar at the farthest corner of the passage that ran round the grand staircase, almost hidden by it, and he seemed to be waiting. He did not see her, and she stood quite still for a moment, hoping he would go away. How fat and red he had grown! But he did not move, and Anne felt that it would be absurd for her to be caught waiting on the stairs, to avoid meeting the master of the house. Then Muriel's door suddenly opened, and she came out just below Anne.

"My dear, what a success!" she cried with almost girlish pleasure. "Foster," calling to her maid, "come and see Lady Anne's gown." Anne blushed deeply, and looked almost awkward; she could see that Lord Cheriton had not moved; she turned toward him, meaning to greet him as naturally as possible. But he did not seem to see her; his eyes were fixed on his wife, with an expression that Anne could not understand. She gave a little shiver, and looked

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at the beautiful, gorgeously arrayed woman before her, feeling as if she had never till now seen truly the tragedy in her cousin's eyes. The exquisiteness of Muriel's heavily embroidered white satin gown, and the admirably placed shining gems, only heightened the note of bravely borne sorrow, the still defiance with which she faced her woman's humiliations. Anne, as she thought this, could hardly breathe, she was so oppressed by the consciousness of Lord Cheriton's presence. She waited in dread for the moment when Muriel should see her husband.

But Lady Cheriton passed quickly down the front stairs without looking round and reached the hall in a moment. She could not hear the stately and courteous "How d' ye do" of the master of the house, as he greeted her cousin on the landing. His manner could at times be excellent, and it saved Lady Anne from all apparent embarrassment.

CHAPTER XXII

GOSSIP WITH A PURPOSE

“**A**H, Mr. Colquhoun! we were just speaking of you!” exclaimed Lady Turton.

“No harm, I hope—How d’ye do, Mrs. Maurice? How d’ye do, Lady Turton?” and in a moment he was sitting between them on a high chair, nursing one foot in a smart boot and wrinkled sock, and adjusting his eye-glass as if in haste not to lose a moment in looking at them.

“Only wondering whether you were still in Paris,” replied Mrs. Maurice, languidly. She was leaning against the cushions on a large sofa with her back to the light, giving her usual impression of youthful yet sumptuous beauty. Opposite to her, erect and alert, trim and straight, in a richly beaded mantle, and a feathered London-season bonnet, sat Lady Turton, benevolent and indulgent towards her companion, her firm little mouth a trifle softer, and her small, bright eyes less severe than usual.

“The less we ask about Paris the better, I suppose, dear Mrs. Maurice?”

“Delightful drives in the Bois,” murmured Colquhoun, with a sweet smile.

“You are such a humbug,” said the golden-haired lady on the sofa to her pug.

“It’s a wicked world that makes him so, not his own

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nature," said Horace. "But though Paris cannot interest either of you, London does interest me, and I want to know what you have all been doing."

"Oh, just as usual," and Mrs. Maurice yawned. "James has been seeing a great many dull men, and bringing them here."

"And you have been seeing a few amusing ones, and bringing them here?"

Mrs. Maurice laughed. "You won't let anybody else pretend anything," she replied.

"And whom has Lady Cheriton been seeing?"

There was a moment's silence, then Lady Turton said solemnly: "I must own up. I was shocked, I know, and I scolded you almost rudely the last time we met. But I can be frank, and I confess now that you were right, and I was wrong."

"I was never in the least shocked, nor have I scolded any one; so I need make no apology. I have known her for some time," and Mrs. Maurice heaved a soft sigh.

"But my dear ladies," observed Colquhoun, "I never said —"

"Oh, you never say anything, you know," interrupted Mrs. Maurice; and Colquhoun, feeling annoyed, smiled at her benignly.

"It is quite true that she is going to force the man on to Cheriton, and she made Sir Thomas promise to support him," snarled Lady Turton.

"No—really?" demurred Horace.

"It has been in *The South Downshire Gazette*."

"You don't say so? When?" Then musingly, "Now I do wonder how that came about!"

"The people down at Cheriton are mad about it. I ran

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down to do some business for Sir Thomas, and I had half a dozen people waiting to see me, to ask if it could be true."

"So they are very angry?"

"Furious, of course."

"My husband says he is the most promising young man he has met for a long time, so we are helping to run him," put in the rich, languid voice from the sofa cushions. "Curious, is n't it? I had them all here to dinner, and, of course, James took her in; and they talked all the time about the new friend. I wonder James found it amusing. She looked so thin and excited."

"Yes," agreed Horace, "it is curious how thin and excited she has looked lately; and flushed, too."

"Only it's absurd," and Mrs. Maurice sat upright, the folds of her diaphanous draperies falling gracefully about her, "for her to keep up all that old prudishness. She really seems to think that she can start a pocket young man of absurdly good looks, who never takes his eyes off her, and —"

"Did you see him at the Court ball, when she was walking in to supper? You know some paper once gave a ridiculous account of the way the Countess of Cheriton walks in to supper at a Court ball. I was just opposite to him, across the doorway, and you would have thought he had seen a celestial vision."

"Yes, he has got that trick with his eyes," answered Mrs. Maurice, a little crossly; she did not see why Lady Turton should interrupt her.

"When do you go into the country, Lady Turton?" asked Colquhoun.

"About the middle of the month."

"Lady Cheriton is going on or before the 20th. I suppose she leaves earlier than usual on account of the political

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campaign. When shall I find you in? No, I can't stay, Mrs. Maurice. I only came to show that I am back. Shall we meet anywhere to-night?"

In a few minutes he was walking down the street and making his way to the Cheritons' house. As he entered the hall, he saw Biddulph letting himself down the stairs from step to step in his blind way, and Horace waited for him.

He had not wished to see Biddulph, or to have any serious talk with him; but the uncertain element in his motives and actions, which probably accounted for the impish look that often came into his face, made him decide to try an experiment.

As Biddulph passed between the marble pillars of the large low hall, a familiar voice arrested him, and Colquhoun tripped round a pillar to his side.

"Walking or driving?" he asked.

"Walking," said Biddulph.

"Then let me come too."

Mr. Biddulph submitted with a grunt, and the two walked across the square that was resounding with the sounds of the nearest streets. The air was hot, and the pavements smelt more like those of Paris than of London.

"Who was in?" asked Colquhoun.

"Only Lady Anne."

"Well," said Colquhoun, "I have been wanting to see you. What do you think of this election business?"

Biddulph was long accustomed to Colquhoun's little way of coming to him, if he wanted any influence to be brought to bear on Lady Cheriton, or even if he merely wished for information; and to perceive this generally put him on the defensive.

"What election?" rather gruffly.

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"Have n't they told you then?" said Colquhoun, stopping short in his surprise.

"Yes, I suppose they have," answered Biddulph, walking on without him.

Three quick little steps brought Horace to his side in an instant.

"Do you think," he asked quickly, "that it is of any use for this youth to stand for the Cheriton division?"

"I don't see why not," said Biddulph; "he has got talent, remarkable talent, and he will have the Maurice and the Cheriton influence."

"The *Lady* Cheriton influence," said Colquhoun, in marked accents.

"Well," said Biddulph, a little contemptuously, "do you suppose Lord Cheriton will take the trouble to object, or that it would be much odds if he did?"

"Perhaps not; and yet it is one thing for a woman to act alone, and another for her to go directly against her husband, however bad a one."

"That's true," said Biddulph, now himself pausing and turning towards Colquhoun. "But does he, as a matter of fact, object?"

"Yes, very strongly."

"And does Lady Cheriton know of this?"

"No, she does n't, and it is rather a delicate matter; for the fact is, Biddulph, that I, for one, can't tell her why he minds, and he certainly can't tell her either."

"Explain," said the other, impatiently.

"Well, he thinks," said Colquhoun, turning away to knock the ash off his cigarette, "that—well, in short, that her ladyship has taken too much of a fancy to the young man."

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"D—n his impertinence," cried Biddulph, with a harsh laugh. "There is a limit to what can be endured, and this passes it."

Colquhoun shrank a little from such a crude display of wrath.

"But, my dear fellow, he is always about with her."

"So are you," almost vociferated Biddulph. "And so am I. Look here, Colquhoun," and he paused again, "you go to your club, and leave me to go my ways, and don't talk such vile nonsense, if you are a man and a gentleman. This idiotic set you live in puts a low, mean interpretation on everything they see. Now take my advice and drop this at any rate. You will soon see what a fool you 've been. Good-night."

And then the unwieldy figure turned its back so resolutely on the other, that he gave it up and turned away, shrugging his bony shoulders under the perfectly fitting clothes.

"The old bear grows blinder every day," muttered Colquhoun, while the other grumbled to himself, smiling but still angry:

"Lord Cheriton should be told at once of Dacre's engagement to Lady Anne, and it should, if her old fool of a father gives his consent, be announced before the election comes on."

CHAPTER XXIII

UNDER NEWMAN'S STATUE

IT would be a mistake to suppose Horace Colquhoun to be qualifying at this time for the rôle of a Machiavellian or Mephistophelian plotter. There was not enough consecutiveness or forethought in his actions for either part. He was too garrulous, and the imp element in him constantly upset his larger manœuvres. He hated Lady Cheriton, and he had convinced himself — absolutely convinced himself — that she was falling from that intolerable pedestal of virtue, from which she had seemed hitherto to regard her husband, and lately his friend also, as if they were crawling animals at its foot.

Horace had come to a stage in his friendship with Lord Cheriton in which he must either suffer from remorse about Lord Cheriton's wife, or must turn that remorse into all manner of uncharitableness. He had done the latter, and it was growing upon him to wish to give her pride, and perhaps even her goodness, a nasty fall. But he had almost persuaded himself that it would really be best and safest for her to own that she was beaten, and to leave Cheriton free to start a new life. His morality was all on the side of an immediate separation. To oust her from Cheriton Abbey, or to disgust her with it, and to make her feel that her good name was hard to preserve while she was in her present position were his chief points.

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And if a young man had at last made an impression on "the icicle," as he and Lord Cheriton often called her, then it became "her duty to put aside her religious scruples, divorce her husband, and settle down as the wife of the good-looking nobody."

That Horace would have talked as much scandal to Mrs. Maurice and Lady Turton, that he would have put that paragraph concerning the election in *The South Downshire Gazette*, just before starting for Paris, and that he would have done other things almost as annoying to Muriel, but for the bet made one night when Lord Cheriton was a little drunk, is uncertain. But it was to him obviously better for Lady Cheriton to retire, and for her husband to begin again (rather a vague thing that beginning again) and for Horace himself to get £7000 as soon as all was settled. However, he really often forgot all about "the d—d money" while he was making little plans for the good of others; in spite of which he was constantly betraying his feelings, if not his little plans, and doing things likely to make those very plans abortive.

Colquhoun had taken a great fancy to Lord Berringfield, a promising boy with some of his own social tastes and a gift for appreciating all those things that are accounted good by men of Horace's type. Lord Berringfield found "old Horace" capital company, and was patient enough to put up with his occasional fits of gouty grumpiness in consequence.

One night, the older man was unusually cross; something had upset his liver. He had brought Lord Berringfield back to his rooms, a luxurious flat, in mansions very near the present French embassy, with the great advantage of an outlook on Hyde Park from the sitting-room. He gave his

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young friend an admirable cigar, took one himself, and went on grumbling. He would never, he said, dine with minor royalties again. They fed you on garbage cooked in German sauces, with sour Rhine wine, to make a marsh of your tortured inside.

But it was not only Rhine wine or German sauces that had produced Horace's state of temper. A suspicion had been growing in his mind during the present London season, that his own position in society was suffering from the general opinion concerning the openly scandalous conduct of his patron and friend. Much may be forgiven to a man who indulges his bad passions with a fair amount of good taste and regard for appearances. But lately, Lord Cheriton had exceeded all bounds, without even the excuse of his wife being a dull or unpopular woman. Hitherto, Colquhoun had succeeded in posing as the virtuous and sorrowful guide, philosopher, and friend of the dissolute Earl; but to-night, not for the first time, he had detected in the sarcastic enquiries after his exemplary companion, that the world at large was beginning to think that the guardian angel showed more facility for following the sinner, than for leading him into better paths. Perhaps their visit to Paris, with certain attendant circumstances which shall be nameless, had proved the proverbial last straw in public opinion.

As Horace sat cross-legged on a divan by his open window, whence, across boxes of beautifully kept flowers, the eye could rest on the silent Park below, he looked like a quaint, spoilt, elderly child.

" You and Cheriton seem to have had a pretty good time in Paris," observed Lord Berringfield, unconsciously touching a sore place.

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"Well, he wanted a change," retorted Horace, angrily. "It's a dog's life he lives down in those rooms of his on the ground floor, and I don't believe he has ventured into the drawing-room once this season. There they go on—music, visitors, singing, people coming and going. I believe you could find women who have been to that house for years who will boast that they have never set eyes on him."

Lord Berringfield made a faint, warning motion with his hand as some one was shown into the room.

"Well, I don't care if it *is* Henry Dacre, or anybody else. Good-evening, Dacre, take a cigar, or whatever you want"; then still looking at Berringfield's fair, unintelligent face, Horace went on: "I say it's preposterous, and I can't see a chance—no, not a ghost of a chance—of the man pulling himself together again, while such a state of things lasts. What can he do but sink deeper and deeper? And that's the result of marrying a good woman!"

Perhaps the sour wine had made a slight impression on Horace's head as well as on his liver, for he was evidently not quite himself. Dacre stood by the fireplace, which was filled with delicate blossoms, holding an unlighted cigar in his hand and looking down at the flowers.

"But I don't see what could be done now," replied Berringfield, "unless he were prepared to behave fairly decently."

"Be done?" echoed Colquhoun, angrily. "It is clear enough what ought to be done. She ought to divorce him, and give him a chance of starting afresh."

"Good Lord, Horace!" said Berringfield, laughing. "First a man insults his wife in every conceivable way, and then it's her duty to give him a chance of marrying somebody else! What next?"

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"It's quite as much for her good as for his."

There was a moment's silence, and Dacre wondered as he stood immovable, studying the rare flowers at his feet, whether his host had forgotten his presence.

"Great heavens, what nonsense!" exclaimed Berringfield. "As my mother says, she has a unique position now! It might, from your point of view, be good for him to be free; but it would make her a sort of moral dowager, respected, if you like, but not the great lady she is now."

Horace looked sulky, and threw the end of his cigar out of the window with an impatient gesture. "It is extraordinary, the sort of superstition that has grown up about that woman," he said. "I think, myself, that it would be much safer for her to be out of the present state of things."

"Safer!" cried Berringfield. "I've heard that said about some women—but Lady Cheriton!"

"Do you suppose," asked Colquhoun, "that she is really a block of marble plus tact and brains?"

"But she never has cared for a soul—has she?"

They seemed both to have forgotten the presence of the third person.

"When you were at Eton," said Colquhoun, in a narrative voice, "and I came back from South America, where I was attached to the embassy —"

"Yes, yes, I know," interrupted Berringfield, for he knew how tediously Horace loved to dwell on the only time of his life when he had attempted to do any work.

"Well, when I came back to London, ten years ago, she was twice as handsome as she is now."

"Can't believe that."

Dacre was still strangely silent, wondering, in an odd,

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impersonal manner, what sort of bill was sent in by Colquhoun's florist.

"Oh, she 's aged, believe me," Horace went on spitefully. "But then she was only twenty, and James Maurice was thirty-five, as ugly as he is now, but more amusing."

"James Maurice!" repeated Lord Berringfield, in astonishment.

"Yes, it was Maurice. He was always there. How well I remember it! And poor old Biddulph was always hanging about too. One evening I came in late, and found James Maurice rehearsing a speech—he at one end of the long drawing-room, she at the other —"

"That does n't sound dangerous," interrupted Berringfield, in a knowing manner.

"No, it does n't sound so, I know, but Biddulph thought otherwise. He came in just after me, and stayed till I don't know what hour, and then took Maurice away with him. But what could the poor old elephant do with two people in love?"

"It can't have come to much," said Berringfield, incredulously.

"I don't know," answered Colquhoun, with a meaning air, and the words were perfectly true, for he knew nothing at all about it. Suddenly some impulse seized him; he glanced for the fraction of a second at the black head and the tall figure of Dacre, his eyes still bent downward, his elbow on the mantelpiece, and the unlit cigar in his fingers. Then Horace went on:

"There were things about her then—signs you know—changes of temper and temperature—fits of extraordinary absence of mind—curious excitability—you know the sort of thing."

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Berringfield nodded and Horace paused. "Curiously enough," he went on after a few seconds, "I've noticed nothing of that kind since, till quite lately, and this time old Biddulph evidently sees nothing. Now"—before Berringfield could interrupt—"I'm sure I've been indiscreet enough, and it's late, my dear boy. No, I should say"—with a little start of surprise very well contrived—"my dear *boys*. Hang it, Dacre, I'd forgotten you were there! What a taste you have for turning into a Greek statue. Are you practising for *tableaux vivants*?"

Dacre laughed mechanically, received Colquhoun's handshake passively, and went out with Lord Berringfield.

"Old Horace was screwed," remarked Berringfield, with emphasis, as they stood together on the pavement outside.

"Obviously," replied Dacre, with a forced smile.

"Wine excites his imagination," continued Berringfield, signing to a hansom.

"Enough of it would make him a second-rate novelist," rejoined Dacre, and they parted.

"He was drunk, drunk, drunk," Henry muttered when Berringfield had driven off, and he stood for some moments as blind and rigid as if the word were true of himself. Then the drift of Colquhoun's talk held him strongly and repulsively. A repulsion so intense and sickening was on him that it recalled faintly a scene of his childhood, when he had found amid the bed of mignonette in his garden, some hideous dead animal—indistinguishably awful.

"Curse him for a foul-minded liar," cried Henry. Can no woman be a man's friend, he thought, without a reptile like Colquhoun vilifying all the joys of friendship with execrable insinuations? She used to hear him rehearse his speeches, she at one end of the drawing-room, Maurice at

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the other!" And Berringfield had said: "Does n't sound dangerous." No, it wasn't anything but good and right to rehearse a speech to such a listener. He had done it himself, and so he knew. Yes, he knew, but he had not known that another had had that same experience too. The long drawing-room—yes, with the graceful, thin figure leaning forward, resting one elbow on a table or a chair, every movement betraying sympathy, self-forgetfulness, and the thrill of complete union of thought and feeling. That had all happened to Maurice also, and if Colquhoun were right—and drink often makes a man more, not less, truthful—James Maurice, the great statesman, had ached for that privilege. No wonder! it was enough to make any man ache—and such aching!

Henry had only been conscious that he was walking south-west, but now the broad part of Brompton Road stretched wide before him. How much had Maurice suffered? he wondered. How much could a man suffer that way? It is n't the pain we feel, but the capacity for unlimited pain within us, that frightens us. And Henry was frightened. He tried to fight it, to ignore it, but both were useless. That half-drunk reptile, Colquhoun, had come into the dream of his life, and had turned it into a nightmare. And what can any one do with a nightmare? Nothing, for it is of the essence of a nightmare that we are helpless recipients; and the brain works falsely, while the will is passive—non-existent. Surely, a nightmare is not a bad presentment of what hell might prove to be. It had got him *en grippe* so suddenly, this ugly sense of pain, and through it came Colquhoun's words, like actual thrusts of some instrument, against which he struggled in vain.

"O God! how hideous it is to have her image

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made less sacred, brought down to so low a level—*and yet—*"

For if Colquhoun's suggestions had broken down the invisible barriers that stand round a perfectly good woman, in the eyes of a young man of Dacre's type, not a loss, but a change of fascination had taken place. Muriel's personality had such a hold upon him, her presence was so vivid to him when alone, that in the midst of the pain and shock caused by Colquhoun's rambling talk, a more brilliant, if less holy, more seductive, if less touching, aspect of her, was being revealed to him.

"*And yet,*" he repeated—and this was the waking moment. The nightmare ended, daylight came back to his faculties; he felt the relief of action, as his will asserted itself. There must be—there was—no *yet*. He began to pray that no *yet* should dawn upon him now. He felt on the brink of an unknown world of passion, and was startled by his own helplessness.

He looked up at the sky mechanically to see if there were any stars; in a far more true sense he was looking into the great spaces of his soul for light—for the grace from heaven which he had known in his boyhood, for the aspirations of his early youth, only two or three years ago! Purity, light, peace—he had had them in the past, and had wished that what was highest and best might be made more manifest, more assertive. But these ideas in the stress of life were so elusive! He looked now at the blank walls of his mind; the words purity, light, peace, were not there—just as above the garish London lamps that night there were no stars.

As he realised this, as he felt the absence of what he sought for, his steps took him past the Oratory, and he

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looked at it inquiringly for a moment, but felt no attraction. A second later he stopped half unconsciously before Cardinal Newman's statue.

"No," he cried, bitterly, "you can do everything else for me; you have made luminous the great truths of life; you have shown the intellectual difficulties so clearly that I knew them before I met them, because with infinite pain and travail you trod alone the paths of the generation that was to follow you. But you can't help me now; you could only tell me with that terrible cold light of analysis which you could not soften with the divine tenderness of your smile, that if we let the things of this low world grow up high enough, they will of necessity hide the light behind."

CHAPTER XXIV

“LET IT BEGIN AT ONCE”

ANNE was standing by Muriel, holding a note in her hand, with a puzzled look on her face.

“Well,” said Muriel, as she bent over the proofs of the Annual Report of her Settlement in the East End, “does Henry dine here to-night?”

“No; he has gone to stay with his mother for a few days.”

“Oh, that’s why we heard nothing of him yesterday! I wonder why he did not write before he left! Now it’s of no use for us to bore ourselves with the Turtons to-night. I counted on his completing the conquest of Lady Turton. What a stupid compositor this is!”

Anne said nothing; she had walked to the window, holding the note, and was looking with unblinking eyes at the glare of sunshine.

Henry had written:

DEAR ANNE :

Please make my excuses to your cousin for my non-appearance at luncheon to-day. I came down here by an early train. I felt that I must come away and be quiet—quite quiet for a few days. I have been a good deal tried lately, and two days in the woods at home are the best remedy for mind and nerves.

You are too good to me to mind my writing all this to you about myself. Your devoted HENRY DACRE.

“I suppose he will be back before we go to Cheriton,”

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said Muriel, "or it will be difficult to settle things about our campaign there. It is rather tiresome of him to go off so suddenly. Is his mother ill?"

"He does not say so."

"I suppose it is business, but I thought she did all the business," objected Muriel, a little irritably.

"She may want help occasionally," replied Anne, moving rather wearily across the room.

"Are you coming with me to see the club-room? I ought to start in a quarter of an hour."

"Yes. I want particularly to see it. I must learn all I can, in case I am able to do any work in South London."

She got to her own room and sat down. It was large and high up, and she rested in the big armchair.

"To your cousin," Anne read in the note; it seemed an unusual way for Henry to allude to Muriel, and the whole note was so strained and excited. There seemed to have been some other ending which had been scratched out, and "your devoted" written over it, the unvarying conclusion to all his letters. There was no reference to his mother. Had he, after all, not told her of the engagement? They had agreed that he was to tell her as soon as he went down, and it was extraordinary not to say whether he had done so or not. But there was suffering in the note. What did it mean?

Anne's instinct and her judgment told her that a crisis was at hand. Henry had realised something that he had not realised before, and it was for this that he had gone away—to be alone among the beech-trees on the hillside, to know his heart, and get the courage for action. Then he would come back, and all would be over between them. There was no calm for Anne in this conclusion, neither did

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it amount to a certain conviction, but she was glad, genuinely glad, to think that the end was near.

How strange he was! He did not love her, and yet he could write that note. Well, after all, was it not perhaps just *the* note he would write, to prepare her mind; and surely his silence with regard to his mother was the clearest intimation. "He need not be afraid," thought Anne; "he can go away as easily as he came. There is nothing so terrible as a lingering death, and I would to God that the torture were over."

It had been no small trial to her to feel herself in a false position, a trial peculiar to proud, unworldly minds that have not been much in contact with life. False positions seem to them to involve some moral responsibility, and they can hardly believe themselves to be blameless. There is perhaps nothing more mysterious in the training of souls than the discipline of false positions.

There was an excitement in Anne's manner that looked like high spirits. Muriel was, however, preoccupied, and remarked nothing. She had had, before going out that morning, one of those talks with Horace Colquhoun which she found to be the only possible means of managing business matters with Lord Cheriton. They had quite gradually fallen into the habit of employing him to arrange such things as their arrivals and departures, instructions to the agent, etc., and for a long time this had been the greatest convenience, and had kept them out of the danger of breaking through the icy politeness of manner into which they had settled down, after the miserable clashing of the first years of their life together. Now they let each other know, through Horace, where each intended to be, and something of what each purposed to do.

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Lord Cheriton had this morning told Horace to inform her that when she went to the Abbey on the following Saturday, she must do without the chef, as he should want him at Cobden. Muriel had been afraid that he meant to go to Cobden this year, instead of paying his annual visit to Homburg, and she was feeling the confirmation of her fear acutely. Horace had seemed very much annoyed at this decision of Cheriton's, but suspicions as to Horace were growing in her mind. She found herself almost wishing that the invaluable go-between did not exist, and was forced to acknowledge that, however painful it might be to endure those dreadful state interviews with her husband, it was far more dangerous for them both to depend in this way on Horace. So Muriel, being preoccupied with these weighty matters of her own, noticed nothing special in Anne's face or manner.

The four days during which Henry was still absent passed swiftly. The external bustle of the season did not disturb the sense of stillness, of waiting, that had come over Anne. She was more tired than she knew—tired in heart, soul, and body, but she told herself that these were days of peace. She and Muriel had agreed that Henry must be back in time to dine with Mr. Maurice at the House on Thursday night—"He would surely not be so foolish as to miss that," Lady Cheriton had said.

On Wednesday evening after tea, Anne was reading in her sitting-room, in a vague mental condition, with very little idea of what was in the book, having slipped out of the drawing-room when Mrs. Maurice was announced. She had told herself that she did not expect to see Henry before to-morrow, and it was a shock as of something rather unnatural, and trying to the nerves, when he suddenly opened the door, and walked in.

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"The servants told me you were here," he said, speaking in a low voice. He was very pale, and looked unbrushed and ungroomed, and unlike himself.

"Oh, you are back!" Anne tried to speak lightly, and forced herself to look up at him, but her words and her eyes faltered.

"Anne," he began hurriedly, "I have come back to see you," and then hesitated; "I—I could not stay away any longer."

"No—why should you?" She spoke tremulously and with an effort, but she contrived to smile.

"I have something to ask you, to beg of you with all my heart. I can't live like this. I can't go on waiting in this way. I am getting unnerved, absurd, intolerable." He was half kneeling on a chair by her side, and his dark troubled eyes were fixed on the dusky leaves of a tall plant behind her, while he was acutely conscious of her bent head and of her trembling hand holding the arm of her chair.

"What is the matter?" she asked, very quietly.

"This sort of uncertainty is awful," he cried. "I don't know what your father means, and—" his voice broke a little.

"I don't think you know what you mean yourself, just now," she answered gently.

"Yes I do, I do, but I don't want to startle you. I mean, dear Anne—could you not end all this? Could you not marry me soon—very soon?" His eyes were bent now on her soft, brown hair, and they filled with tears. The pity of it! Oh, the pity of it! For a moment he forgot himself. The trembling of her hand touched him strangely. Ah, how he would cherish her, care for her, build a wall between her and a wicked world! He knelt by her side

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and kissed her hand with a devotion, a gentle tenderness that only a woman's instinct could distinguish from passion. "If you will be my wife," he said, almost as though she were not already engaged to him, "I will live for you and for nothing else. I will have no ambitions, no dreams or fancies — nothing, unless you wish it. A man's whole life," he said almost to himself, "is little to give to a woman like you. My God!" he cried, and his voice sounded terrible to her. "Let it be soon — let it begin at once!"

It was the last words that seemed to Anne the clearest—"Let it begin at once!" They did not ring like the rest, and sounded like traitors to what went before. She was in an agony of doubt, struggling to keep her self-control, when, if she had but known it, to let him see her full heart, to be forced to show a little of the depth in her, might have been the salvation of them both. There is no knowing — might-have-beens must always be counted among our ignorances. But Anne's nerves were so completely overstrung by this time that all she could think of was that she must not break down, but must at all costs remain her quiet self.

"Henry," she said at last, "let me have time to think; you have never spoken in the least like this before." She saw an embarrassed look in his eyes, and added: "You have startled me."

"Please, oh, please forgive me," he cried eagerly.

"Yes, I forgive," said Anne, a little solemnly, more as a general proposition than as if it were an answer to his spoken words, "but let me think a little. I don't know what to say — I don't know what to do."

Her voice was exceedingly troubled, and very unlike that in which she usually spoke. She turned away and buried her face in her hands, while he stood over her, and through

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the utter stillness of the room he heard a voice on the stairs that made his heart beat wildly. "I think," came in muffled tones from Anne's quivering lips, "you must give me three or four days to decide."

"So long?" exclaimed Henry, almost impatiently.

"So long," replied Anne, a little sternly, raising her head, but not looking at him. "We are going down to Cheriton on Saturday, and Muriel expects you to go, too. I will answer your question on Monday."

Henry strode across the room, and back to her. "I do hope you won't let anything stand in the way. Do you think I might go to your father and press my cause myself? Oh, let me go to him now!" There was feverish anxiety in his words, but something also in his face, as if his thoughts were distracted — he had heard a skirt rustling in the next room.

Anne turned to him and, speaking almost vehemently, "No, no," she said, "do nothing before Monday. You went away to the beech woods; I can't do that, but you must leave me in peace. Don't come here to-morrow."

He flushed as she spoke.

"We shall meet at Mr. Maurice's to-morrow evening, and we shall go to Cheriton together on Saturday — now good-night!"

He came nearer to her. "Anne," he said, "may I kiss you?" He had not asked her that since the day in the wood.

She stood in front of him, erect, proud, and yet terribly humble, holding up the fair face to him. And he had the cruelty to kiss her. To him that kiss seemed almost sacramental.

Men clutch for salvation at the holiest things, when they will not save themselves!

CHAPTER XXV

DINNER AT THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

THE First Lord of the Treasury, the taciturn man who, with a bored countenance, followed his wife to race-courses and to many country-house parties, seldom entertained on his own account, and the fact that he was giving a little dinner-party in the House of Commons made a faint stir in its lower precincts.

At the night of the meeting he had said to Lady Cheriton :

“Come and dine with me at the House, and bring the future member.”

“And may I bring my cousin, Lady Anne, who is staying with me?”

“Of course.”

But delays had been inevitable, and the season was drawing to an end before the little dinner came off. Besides Lady Cheriton’s party, it included Mr. Biddulph, Miss Arberton, one of the fair and rather impersonal sisters of Lord Berringfield, and Mr. Maurice’s private secretary. This last individual was the reverse of the ordinary ideal for such an office. He was awkward socially, and either too silent, or inclined to be didactic; but James Maurice had the talent of discerning strength, and Mr. Blomfield possessed a quite unusual power of gaining knowledge on living questions at home and abroad. Mr. Maurice

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saw quickly that Blomfield was bound to succeed, and in the meanwhile, the secretary no doubt was a rock of reference to a wearied statesman.

"How long is it since you have been here?" asked the host of Mr. Biddulph.

"Heaven only knows," was the response, as Biddulph tried to guide his soup successfully over the rugged passes of his beard.

"There must have been a stir in the lobby at the sight of you," said Maurice, smiling.

"Indeed, no," said Biddulph, pushing his plate vindictively; he always resented the difficulties presented to him by soup. Then, looking up with a chuckle: "The denizens of the outer courts of the Temple know me no more."

"You forget that you were distinctly visible under the clock at least twice last session."

"Ah, so I was; that beastly bill kept me standing about awaiting your pleasure."

"It is one of the singular arrangements of the Government under which I have the happiness to serve—" "Listen to him," mocked Biddulph; but Mr. Maurice would not be interrupted—"that the men of real power," he went on, "the Permanent Heads, who depend on no fickle popular breath, and who tell the puppets of an hour what to do, are often almost unknown."

"So much the better for them," said Anne, to whom he had spoken.

"Perhaps; and yet the farce of the thing! Conceive! When I first took office I was one of the whips, and then, by good luck, I got the Under Secretaryship for the Colonies, and, my chief being in the Lords, I had, in the Commons,

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to represent Mr. Biddulph's department, of which I knew as much, probably less, than you do now, Lady Anne."

"But nobody wanted you to know anything about it," said Biddulph.

"Exactly so; I was clay in your hands."

"A very good thing to be,"—and Lady Cheriton smiled affectionately at Mr. Biddulph.

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Maurice; "but there is the truly British farce of the thing. I, who was Biddulph's puppet, and, by the way, had to do all his fighting for him, became the public figure-head in the Commons, and the apparently responsible person."

"No," said Biddulph, "you were by no means a puppet, and, being an intelligent youth and not tied up by red tape, you brought a fresh mind to bear on many things, which is often invaluable. There's a deal more sense in the British Constitution than you logical gentlemen suppose. The value of a common-sense man's opinion, untrammeled by too much knowledge of detail,"—and Biddulph smiled genially down the table, exciting a crowing laugh from Mr. Blomfield,—“is the great factor in many British affairs, from trial by jury down to the Government offices ;—but I protest this is not conversation for dinner-time. Since when have you managed to get quite decent wines ?”

"Since we have had a wine merchant as an M. P.," answered Mr. Maurice. "Hang that bell!"

As he spoke, a bell rang loudly, and there was a sound of hurrying feet in the passage. Mr. Blomfield moved in haste to the door.

"They must do without my vote this time," said his chief, a little irritably. "It's only a division, Lady Anne, brought

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on by certain members who amuse themselves by ruining our digestions, and then go out to dine while we are working. It ought to be put a stop to."

After dinner, Mr. Maurice asked the little party to adjourn to his own room.

"Unless," he said, smiling, "Lady Anne is anxious to go at once to the Ladies' Gallery. I would not for the world deprive her of the elevating pleasure of hearing our legislators display their powers of research into the question of margarine and butter. That's it, isn't it, Blomfield?"

"Butter *or* margarine," suggested Mr. Blomfield, who was watching, with some surprise, the unusual geniality of his chief's manner this evening.

"I wish," he said aside to Dacre, as they followed the others, led by Lady Cheriton and their host, "I wish he had his own friends about him more often; I've not heard him talk so much for a twelvemonth. You can't conceive what a set they live in."

"I've seen some specimens," said Dacre.

"I don't blame her," Blomfield went on, "for being jealous of Lady Cheriton; of course, everybody can see"—but by this time the long stately passages which were filling Anne with a youthful sense of awe and excitement were passed, and they found themselves in Mr. Maurice's room, and Mr. Blomfield's sentence remained unfinished.

It was a large room, lined with books and furnished with two or three large writing-tables and large dark leather chairs, having an old-fashioned look of dignified fixtures about them. Henry noticed that, whereas Mr. Biddulph's rooms and papers were as neat as he was himself untidy, the books and papers in Mr. Maurice's room were not nearly as neat as their exquisitely groomed possessor.

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Anne and Henry had avoided each other after her kindly greeting in the lobby,—kindly, but a little defensive. He was very silent at dinner, and looked so ill that nobody liked to ask him what was the matter.

"It seems irreverent to play about here," Anne observed to Mr. Biddulph, as he followed her to some chairs at a little distance.

"You are very young," he answered,—and added to himself, "but you don't look as if you were playing." He did his best this evening to distract her from a sadness that he dreaded to find in her eyes.

He knew that the best of engagements are rarely cloudless, and that men and women seldom adjust their lives quite smoothly at once. All the same, he was by no means satisfied as to the expression on the sweet, fair face which was lifted up to him as he talked.

Meanwhile their host had settled himself, on the huge green morocco sofa that stood between the windows, with Lady Cheriton. Miss Arberton was being amused by Mr. Blomfield, who was making harmless little allusions to his chief's peculiarities, and Henry stood near them, trying to listen while his eyes wandered to the statesman on the sofa.

Mr. Maurice's sallow face, with its irregular features, was to most people inexpressive to a peculiar degree, but to Muriel it retained much more of what he had been as a younger man, when the expression was less smoothly negative and the eyes were less indifferent than now. For years she had seldom had an intimate talk with him. Indeed, her acquaintances said that her avoidance of him had grown into a pose. But for the last two seasons or so, she had found it quite natural and easy to make small talk with

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him, though he had never before entertained her on his own account, as he was doing to-night.

"The realisation of so many dreams," she said lightly, looking round at the dignified, official sitting-room.

"Yes, and, as you said the other day, the happiness lay in the dream. I wonder if it was not really worth paying for, though the instalments do stretch over so many years."

Muriel looked a little surprised.

"What makes you take things like that to-night?"

"Well," he said, "having you here recalls so much, that it makes me half disposed not to let my grudge against you die out, for having put me in this way of life."

"Not really?" said Muriel quickly and anxiously. "You don't really regret that you took to serious work for your country?"

"Yes, I know you will despise me," said James Maurice, smiling, as he leant back. "I did not appreciate, till the other night, how completely you still idealise it all. You are urging on a new victim."

Muriel was silent, and so sad in face for a moment that Maurice, who was sitting with crossed legs, and one strong well-formed hand pressed on his knee, looked up at her apologetically.

"I should not tease you," he said, "and it's chiefly a question of vocation. You see he may have been born to it. I was n't. I was made in London society, manufactured by a woman. I might have been such a happy country-gentleman."

"It is n't true," cried Muriel. "It is some absurd fit of depression. You ought to go to Homburg."

He had had a friendly purpose in asking Lady Cheriton to dine that night, for he took in more of the women's talk

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at home than his wife supposed, and had worried over it, and teased himself as to what he could possibly do. It had struck him that he might try to give her a delicate hint. But the worst of delicate hints is that the hint is apt to be lost in the delicacy. Also his talk was too full of reminiscence to-night, and his mind was oppressed by the burden of his home life, which seemed to become more unbearable every season.

"You are not really sorry?" repeated Muriel, after a moment's silence, as if asking him to contradict himself.

"I won't be baulked of my point," he said. "You made a great mistake with me;" and, in a lower voice: "You never knew what you made me suffer. I want you to learn a little caution. You should dread your own influence."

Then he became silent and embarrassed, fearing that he had been too serious and too explicit, and he hastened to give another turn to his words.

"I own it may be quite different; you may have found the real article at last."

"You shall not talk like that," said Lady Cheriton, looking for a moment some of her old proud confidence in him, and it came as a refreshment to the tired man by her side.

"No," he said; "you couldn't make me more than the humdrum, conventional, at heart immoral, British statesman, who is always pretending to believe in a huge show built upon shams, and carried on by humbug. The fact is, if you are not a fanatic or a genius, the machinery is too much for you, and the better you work your part of it the more it crushes you into a bit of itself, and then you writhe against it, and call it names."

Muriel sat forward, her lips a little parted.

"You've never talked to me like this before," she said,

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and tears rose in her eyes. She looked very like her old self now, and he had never understood why he sometimes heard her called a hard woman. "You are very unkind to-night, you say things on purpose to hurt. Your career has been such a joy, such a justification to me. If I thought even *that* had been a mistake, I hardly know how I should bear it."

Maurice was startled. His words had not been simple joking ; they had had some bitterness in them, bitterness against her, perhaps, and the underlying bitterness of his home life, but he had not meant her to take them seriously. He bent a little more towards her, over the large green leather seat between them, but there was nothing quite like the past in his present attitude.

Yet she could not, quite unmoved, hear him speak earnestly, with the peculiar clearness and resonance of that voice which influenced crowds now, and which had been her chief danger some ten years ago.

"To give you that joy was my one object for years," he cried, forgetting all about the delicate hint. "Don't pay attention to anything I've said, to-night. The humdrum I swear at is the greatest relief in life, and I do believe in quite a tenth of the opinions I profess in public. Now I must go."

He stood up and looked at her for a moment with self-reproach, as he saw something in her face that made him remember that her suffering might be greater than his, and her means of relief far less. There they must leave it; the wife of Lord Cheriton and the husband of Mrs. Maurice had no intention of asking sympathy from anyone, far less from each other, but as they stood together in silence for a moment they felt the little drama of their evening, while neither wished to have it over again.

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"By the way," said Mr. Maurice, turning towards the others, "there may be something in the House presently that will interest Lady Anne,—an important telegram has come from Egypt."

A subtle change in his face made them all feel as if, in a moment, he had taken up again the weight of responsibility that had been laid aside, and Mr. Blomfield knew that his chief's evening out was over.

Muriel left Anne and Miss Arberton in the Ladies' Gallery, and drove Mr. Biddulph home.

"So that is our postscript," she thought, as she leant back in the dark carriage, and a warm sense of affection came over her towards the friend by her side.

"Lovers come and go," she thought, "but there are friends who never fail."

She did not notice Mr. Biddulph's silence till the carriage stopped at his own door.

"We have n't had much to say. I thought you wanted to talk to me." She spoke brightly.

"Yes—by the way, should I find you in to-morrow evening? You go on Saturday, don't you?"

"Yes, come any time to-morrow night," and she clasped his big hand, as he turned, after stumbling out upon the pavement.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE GIFT AT THE ALTAR

IT was past two o'clock that same night, and Anne was standing in the drawing-room, with Mr. Colquhoun close by her. She and Miss Arberton had come away from the House together, and now the carriage had taken Miss Arberton home. Anne had welcomed the excitement of her first visit to the House of Commons, almost feverishly, and if the pleasure was not what she had dreamed it would be, it was still a potent distraction. She had been eagerly telling Colquhoun all that had passed, feeling as if he must be equally eager to hear the details from an eye-witness, when she suddenly perceived that he was not listening, and was even beginning to talk to her very seriously of something else. He spoke confidentially, lowering his voice, and assuming an understanding between them that was quite new. As soon as Anne perceived his drift, she made up her mind to check him at once.

"I don't think I quite understand," she said in words that came slowly and distinctly, but a little haughtily.

"Well," replied Colquhoun gently, "I should like you to try and understand, because I think it is for everybody's advantage. I repeat, that I think Lady Cheriton should have a separation. You know this state of things is intolerable. To you 'upstairs' or 'in another place,' as we say in the smoking-room, it is simple, because you forget the

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existence of the master of the house; but to my mind it is an impossible situation. I don't suppose they have spoken to each other once this week."

"O yes, they have," cried Anne, but she felt that the remark was weak, for the meeting had been a brief and accidental one. "I don't think," she went on stiffly, after a moment, "that it is exactly my business, if Muriel chooses to endure."

"Yes, I know," replied Colquhoun, irritably. "But don't you see that she suffers from the state of things almost more than she knows, and that she has nobody to help her. You are all blind—blind. Don't you see the danger she is in? Will no one lift a little finger to help her? Where is she now?"

He said it almost as he would have asked whether she was on fire, or drowning, or in any other position of imminent peril.

"She is showing Mr. Dacre some letters about the election."

"Dacre, Dacre,—always Dacre!" exclaimed Colquhoun, watching her narrowly while he spoke.

Anne started, but controlled herself with a strong effort.

It seemed at the moment, as if the hint conveyed by Colquhoun's voice and manner was an absolute revelation, as startling as any unexpected evil could be. But in reality it was only a discovery of what had underlain her own consciousness since the day she had come up to London.

Had she not been blindly struggling all this time to keep down some dark and unkind thoughts of Muriel, and trying to hide from herself an interpretation of Henry's attitude during their engagement that would explain too much?

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She stood rigidly straight before Mr. Colquhoun, betraying nothing but the same touch of haughty contempt with which she had met his first confidence. But it needed a strong effort of her will.

Before it was necessary to speak, the distant door opened, and Muriel came in with Henry by her side, walking towards them, and talking earnestly together. For many years after, Anne could have lived through that moment again, as vividly as if the scene were before her eyes. Muriel was entirely in white, and wore no jewels except her famous pearls.

How beautiful! How wonderfully beautiful she looked, with the strange sadness of her eyes, and the brightness of her smile! And Henry? All that Anne felt and knew was that he was gazing at that slight, stately figure,—intently, searchingly. “Blind—blind,” seemed again to come from Colquhoun’s closed lips, while he tried to meet Anne’s eyes, as if to ask: “Can’t you—won’t you see?”

And Muriel, slowly reaching them, asked Anne languidly whether she was ready to go to bed, and half absently bidding the two men “Good-night,” she took her cousin’s arm and led her away.

Anne was thankful for the shortness of a summer’s night. It was three o’clock when she reached her room, and two hours later she slipped down-stairs and escaped into the open air. How still it was! The tapping made by the feet of the simple figure in grey echoed quite loudly as she hurried on towards Kensington.

Hyde Park was just opened, and she entered, only half conscious of the strong relief that the green brought to her sleepless eyes. Every now and then, as she passed on, she clenched her hands, or held them together with a tight pres-

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sure. On and on—past the Row, through Kensington Gardens, smelling sweetly of the night's uninvaded peace—past the children's walk, and away by Kensington Palace still asleep, till her goal, the Carmelite church, was reached.

As she went in through the dark porch, she heard the harsh, monotonous, muffled tones of the friars in the distant choir. She fancied, but she could not be sure, that she caught the words "*Tibi soli peccavi*"—"Against Thee only have I sinned." And it came over her with a wave of meaning, as she sank upon her knees. What, after all, were her own wrongs, her own provocation? For all sin is against God only, and we all have done it. It was not possible to explain how it came to her, but it was a flood of strange music over her rebellious soul. Why resent? Why cry out in hatred? Why even strive so hard to forgive? It was God who had made them, against whom was their sin.

"That Thou mayst be justified in Thy words, and overcome when Thou art judged. For behold Thou hast loved truth, and the uncertain and hidden things of Thy wisdom Thou hast made manifest," beyond all reasoning, all words.

The poor soul that had come there, struggling to forgive, come to get the weapons with which to fight herself, now rested awe-struck in those greater mysteries. "Lord," this soul now said, "they and I belong to Thee, and what we do is against Thee only, and how we suffer from each other's wrong-doing is Thy affair also, and Thou must bear it for us."

"The uncertain and hidden things" cannot be spoken, but to Anne, with a crushed heart and weary being, they were exceedingly "*manifest*."

Presently she rose, and going to the sacristy, rang the bell, and asked if one of the Fathers would come to the confessional. A few minutes later, after simply telling what she

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had done wrong since her last confession, Anne was back in her place. She had come for absolution, not for sympathy and advice.

Mass was being said, and Anne went to Holy Communion, and made a long, peaceful thanksgiving. Then, going out into the street, she found a shop where some breakfast could be got, and swallowed some food quickly, feeling as if she was in the midst of a great and important work that must be done at once.

Passing back into the cool shadow of the church, she sat down in the Lady Chapel, and tried to think quietly and coherently of the position. That Colquhoun had been the means of making clear what she must soon have seen for herself, was evident to her. She wondered now that she had not seen it before. But what did it mean? She had before been blind; she must now beware of her own judgment. She fixed her elbows on the sharp edge of the bench in front of her, and pressed her hands on her forehead, while great tears welled up in her eyes.

Was he unfaithful, or, rather, was not the old fear the true one? Had he never loved her from the first? Never at all? Then none of those precious moments—precious, in spite of her doubts—had ever been really hers. In all the time before hope left her, never had she clung to those first days with him at Cobden, and, above all, to those moments in the wood, as she did now. Could she but keep that remembrance as having been something real? “If it had not been for Muriel he must have loved me,—he did love me,” she moaned.

Anne raised her eyes to the statue of the Madonna above her. Had nothing been her own? A deep blush of shame and protest covered her face. Could he have been so com-

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pletely deceitful, so hardened a liar? The thought of his last talk with her, when he had pressed her to begin their married life quickly, was unbearable. Surely he had been terribly cruel then, terribly false—yet, after all, not false enough to act that scene well. He had been like a frightened man coming for help, fiercely demanding help, because he had lost his nerve.

Then what must have passed in his mind seemed gradually to become clear to her. He must, in those days at Cobden, have believed her to be his real attraction. On the day of his proposal, he must have been drawn to her. Afterwards, feeling safe in his engagement, he had let Muriel's fascination grow upon him, until, somehow, he had found out the truth, and had run away to face it alone.

But it had been cruel, horribly cruel, to come after that, and ask her to protect him against himself. Did he imagine that he could satisfy her with such a lie in action? Why had he not, for heaven's sake, told her the truth? Did he suppose she could want him *now*?

But he was surely in danger, and so was Muriel; yet Anne knew that to do any false thing on her own part,—such as to keep, even for a time, her claim on Henry's honour,—in order to save them from each other, would be worse than useless. She must tell him the truth, and let him go free, and leave them both to God. She was not morbid, and she knew that it was not possible by any self-sacrifice to undertake another man's soul. God must see to it. She could not forget the Divine Master's answer to that question which our hearts are ever asking when we love a friend truly: “Lord, and what shall this man do?” “If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? Follow thou me.” Peter was not told the secrets of John.

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The practical point immediately before her arose from the necessity of deciding whether she should now go down to Cheriton, as already planned, on the following day. She had told Henry that she would think over his anxiety to hurry on the marriage, and let him know her decision on Monday. She shrank from being at Cheriton with him and Muriel, and yet it seemed almost impossible to prevent it at the eleventh hour. Would it not be better to spend the Sunday there exactly as they had planned, and to await the decisive talk with him on Monday? It was true this would throw him into Muriel's society during two whole days, but her instinct was rather against any sudden and abrupt catastrophe. She thought that the breaking off of the engagement would be more quietly and naturally done at Cheriton, and that she herself was hardly fit to act calmly and with tact, during her present mood of strain. As to the additional suffering to herself, it was such a little more that she scarcely counted it.

Later on, when the dreaded crisis had come and passed, she asked herself if the decision arrived at that morning had been a right one.

Having, with almost unnatural calmness, settled what she had to do, and would, if possible, carry through, Anne weighed the subject carefully from Muriel's standpoint, and this involved a fight against a blacker doubt. Could Muriel have had no idea how she was leading Dacre on during these past weeks? Had she, too, been blind,—strangely blind? Little things crowded in on Anne's mind,—little actions, words, arrangements, all that had wounded and stung her, all that she had tried to ignore, or to explain away at the moment. Had not these two been all in all to each other? Had they thought of her at all in their eager

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talks and plans? Had she not been often alone and often forgotten, even while sitting close to them?

But then she put these darker suspicions vigorously away, deeming that she was no fair judge of these things. By God's help she would not be little or mean in bearing her sorrow. Sobs again shook her frame; for that she loved Henry, loved him with terrible strength, with her will and against it, with her judgment and against it, was a certainty that possessed her entirely, with an ever-increasing conviction. But she sternly cut the future from her heart, and bade it mourn in a solitary place where no hope was.

Gradually, as she thought less and prayed more, Anne grew in pity for those who were costing her so much pain, and there came over her a longing that her pardon might be complete, that her suffering might bring them a blessing, that she might emulate the tender mercies of the Divine forgiveness. What could she do for them? How could her pain win them help in their great danger, and bring them safely out of it? There was no thought of self in this, no wish that Henry should ever return in any sense to her,—her heart was too sorely wounded for that. But she yearned over him and over Muriel, till, in a great cry of the soul, she asked that, if it were God's will, she might leave there at the foot of the altar all her own earthly happiness, to purchase for those two the gift of pure sorrow here, and its exceeding great reward hereafter.

Only in one of vivid faith could such an offering have been an act of heroism; only in one of great simplicity could it have been real; only in very singular circumstances could it have been justified. In Anne's prayer, all these conditions were united.

PART III

CHAPTER XXVII

AT CHERITON ABBEY

A N UNUSUAL bustle at the Cheriton Station, and an air of cheerful importance among the porters, were among the symptoms denoting that Lady Cheriton had just come down from London. The heat of the day was passed, and a cool breeze came gratefully to the little party that drove along the dusty highroad to the Abbey. Muriel and Anne leant back and cried "How delicious, how refreshing!" in one breath, while Henry Dacre and Horace took off their hats at the same moment, and breathed a deep breath of relief.

"You may take them off now, but you must put them on in the town," said Muriel, with a mock air of ceremonial. "Ah, there it is!" she cried, as a bend in the road brought them in full view of town and Abbey.

Nestled amid the woods and climbing the steep hill between them were the red roofs of the town, and the long straight line of the High Street. Tall and gabled was the Town Hall, and near it rose most of the more important houses, some of them square, ugly, and grey. But whether lovely or the reverse, all were half concealed by ivy or irrepressible climbing roses, by stone pines, or by immense lilacs and laburnums, now long past flower. It seemed a

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town planted in a garden. The grey roof of the old church came in line with the lower slope of the hills above the town, and, rising in the high range of the downs above church and town, and standing clear against the blue sky, was the old group of dark, irregular buildings that was of all dates and styles, and that had in all its different stages of growth, and decay, and restoration, been called Cheriton Abbey.

"No wonder she loves it," thought Colquhoun, as he saw her silent gaze fixed upon it, with an expression he wished he could understand.

Dacre was seeing it for the first time, but Muriel pointed out nothing, and offered no explanations, whereas she usually was an eager cicerone, loving to tell something of its history to a new-comer.

The others talked, but she did not speak, and lay back gazing intently before her. As they came into the narrow lane that led into the High Street, she held herself up and looked about her, giving friendly response to the universal greetings of the groups gathered round doorways or in the road, enjoying the evening air.

Henry felt at once that here was the place where she was happiest, and that no position among her own class, however tenaciously she held it, was as dear to her as this that she had helped to make for herself in her husband's domains.

Colquhoun, too, knew most of the faces, and greeted many, while he spoke to Muriel, asking her questions as to recent news.

"How decayed Sparrow looks!"

"Didn't you know that his wife had died, and he has no one to keep him tidy?"

"Dear old Tomkins, he must be any age now!"

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"Just turned eighty."

And then Colquhoun saw another familiar figure that came out of the Cheriton Arms, half way up the High Street. How changed! the gait was unsteady, the clothes untidy, but the look in the eyes was clear enough; he was staring at the carriage and he did not take off his hat. It was Holmstead, the dismissed groom.

Colquhoun saw Muriel's lips firmly set, and she became a little paler, and did not speak again till they had driven under the avenue of horse-chestnuts that led to the elaborate Gothic doorway of the Abbey—Gothic of the revival of the XVIIIth century.

"Let us have tea at once, and then go out," she said to Anne. "Don't let us waste any of this weather."

They mounted the shallow stairs that curved upwards from the hall, with deep piled carpets and gilt bannisters.

But æsthetic objections to details never dimmed Muriel's enjoyment of the sense of space, of colour, of what she called the Cheriton smell,—one of those clinging scents that hang about old country houses, suggesting the pot-pourri and mignonette and cherry pie of many generations.

As she walked along the slippery floor of the long low gallery that even for the most critical could not be spoilt by occasional lapses into the furniture of the Georges, going to her favourite seat in the far window looking over the valley, not even the stab of pain that the sight of Holmstead had given her could quite spoil the joy of this summer home-coming.

"I always have tea here first," she said to Anne, "and then go out, and nobody brings me any business till next day."

As she sat down, and Anne bent over a bowl of red roses

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by the window, while Colquhoun was showing Dacre a Romney in the gallery, some words that had passed between herself and Biddulph the night before, came back to her.

“I wish you had not taken up this election so keenly.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t think you have quite your usual good judgment about it.”

“But you think it would be such an excellent thing for him.”

“Yes, I do, but I don’t want you to suffer for it. Don’t be quixotic. Remember, the best happiness you have is in having done the duties of your position thoroughly well; and the knowledge that your people appreciate it, though not the highest reward, is not to be despised. Don’t set your heart on getting your own way about something unnecessary. Your position is too difficult for that. Don’t risk any change at your home.”

Muriel had cried impatiently at the time, “Can’t one sometimes do something for a friend?” but now his words came over her with fresh strength.

Only those who love places deeply, with a personal love, could understand the influence of the atmosphere of Chertton on Muriel. The green swelling of the hills to the north, the rounded waves of beech trees hanging down their sides, the lowing of the cows in the low-lying land sinking away to the south, the movements of some half-bold rabbit immediately under the Abbey wall, the sounds of the children playing, down in the town,—nay, even the great tapestry chair she sat back in, the mellow depths of the Vandyck near her, the great stands of flowers, and the glimpse of the cedar drawing-room through an open door,

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—all these were a part of the scene in which she had suffered so much, in which she had seen the hopes and joys of youth die away, but had only loved the beautiful things about her the more. No one loves flowers so intensely as those who are in physical pain. Perhaps some perceptions are made more acute by the suffering of the rest of the nature.

Yes, Mr. Biddulph was right ; she must take heed to her steps, for her road was very slippery. But she would not think, this evening; she would only enjoy ; and as the others gathered about the tea-table, she told them that in ten minutes she intended to start for a walk in the park, and whoever chose might come, too, but she should wait for no one.

Colquhoun never cared for a walk without an object, and now he strolled down into the town, and looked in upon the agent, and chanced upon the parson, with both of whom he cautiously felt his way as to the coming election. It seemed to him that they were as reticent as he could wish to be himself.

Muriel, left alone that night in the tower room, which she had chosen for her own, sat by the window, looking down on the valley. It was the largest of the towers, and the room was big and commanded two views: one of the park, to the north, where just glimmered the waters of the lake between the hills, clothed in hanging beech woods; and the other, of the river, curving between low rich meadows, until it was hidden by the town, and then coming into view again, lazily widening as it neared the sea.

The moon had risen, and the mist floated in faint clouds below the Abbey, lying over the low land about the river and the tiny streams that divided the rich meadows. The water shone brightly, and it seemed from Muriel's height as if she were at once in the sky with the moon, and

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strolling by the silver river, so clear were the heaven above and the water beneath the floating mist.

Yes, she was enjoying the first evening at Cheriton, about which she was almost superstitious, taking it as a proof that keen enjoyment was still possible to her. But she was enjoying it with an effort of the will. Just as in the story, the friar who, being asked why he lingered several moments behind the others at the chapel door, explained that he had to say to all thoughts of the world, "Stop there, don't come with me," before he was free to pray, so Muriel had deliberately, while waiting for her tea in the gallery, banished to the threshold of her mind all that would interfere with the glory of the summer evening.

But now she frowned a little, as she went back in thought to that tiresome talk with Mr. Biddulph. He was right. Cheriton—every stone of it, the people—every man, woman, and child, were dear to her, were far too dear to be risked. But how was she risking them now? By helping Dacre to become their member? Dear, humdrum, money-making little tradesmen, dear, heavy, hardy farmers, they would not mind. Henry was a Tory, and from the deepest conviction he believed it right to support the Establishment. Three members for the other divisions, and two neighbours, had spoken to her warmly on the subject, after making Henry's acquaintance. Then, had she not always succeeded best, in any local trial of strength, by being bold? As to Lord Cheriton, it was always good for him to see her influence with other people succeed. It did not do to be weak with him; she had made a great mistake as to Holmstead; she ought to have insisted. She had been weak, and evil had come of it. And now she had got his consent to Henry being supported by the Cheriton influence

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in the election. But to explain how this was done we must go back to Muriel's last evening in London.

Mr. Biddulph came in after dinner that evening, and finding as usual Anne, Henry, and Colquhoun, asked Muriel to take him to her own sitting-room. And when he got there, he made the remarks already quoted as to the election, and she said:

"Can't one sometimes help one's friends?" and then half to herself: "I always thought that if I had had a brother I should have loved to work for him, to help him to be great."

Biddulph shifted uneasily in his chair.

"Yes, but mind you do the right things for him."

"But you said," cried Muriel, "that he ought to be a member as soon as possible."

"Yes, but I didn't mean," replied Biddulph in some irritation, "that everything should be sacrificed to it; he is engaged to be married, and that's generally enough to take up a man's time for some months at least."

"Yes, if they were going to be married soon," said Muriel. "But they have not even got her father's permission yet."

Both felt irritated, and did not wish to show it.

"Her fool of a father should make up his mind," said Biddulph, roughly.

"Of course he ought. But in any case, Anne is most anxious that he should get into Parliament, and I can't see the objection."

"No, no," answered Biddulph, uncomfortably. "Only she is the sort of woman who lets herself go to the wall for the sake of those she cares for."

"But how," asked Muriel, opening large, rather imperti-

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nent eyes at him, “ does his standing for Cheriton send Anne to the wall ? She would much rather be the wife of an M. P.”

“ Yes, yes,” said Biddulph, crossly, and he ventured no further, but abruptly brought in his other point. “ Does Lord Cheriton know of the engagement ?”

“ No, nobody knows but you.”

“ Then I think he ought to know before the election.”

“ Anne would not like it.”

“ Nonsense ! he should know it ; ” and then, with a great effort : “ The best justification of your bringing a stranger to be Member down there, is the future connection.”

“ But I can’t tell them all that.”

“ No, but you can tell Lord Cheriton.”

“ Very well.”

Biddulph’s fear of doing harm, and his anxiety to shield her from Colquhoun’s mean suspicions, made him nervous, and it seemed to Muriel that he was critical and hostile. She had meant to tell him about Holmstead, the groom, but she was hurt, and remained silent.

When he said “ Good-bye,” he tried to talk in their usual way, but she would not, and when he pressed her hand in parting, she raised her dark eyes at him reproachfully,—a look that stayed long with him.

“ Will you come to Cheriton ? ” she asked in a voice that struck him as meaning, “ Altho’ I am not quite pleased with you, I ask you, all the same.”

“ Perhaps,” he said, with a sigh that was half a grunt, and went away.

This was the conversation—the incident that Muriel had to forget, before she could enjoy the summer’s evening, and it needed great practice in shutting up whole rooms in her mind, to make it possible.

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"I must get him down soon, and put him right," she thought, "but he is not what he used to be. Can one never lean on anybody?"

Still she had done what he told her. She had gone to Lord Cheriton's study next morning, and dismissing Colquhoun with a joke, had sat down with him alone. Cheriton had appeared profoundly uncomfortable. Muriel's manner had been as natural as if she came there every morning. She had told him then of Anne's engagement, and had asked him if he saw any objection to Dacre's standing for the Cheriton division. She had been surprised at the facility with which he had agreed to it, even saying that he would write a line to the agent. As she had risen to go, a moment later, she had seen a dawning smile on his weak mouth, which was usually grave in her presence.

"Does Horace know of this engagement?"

"Oh, no; please don't tell him."

"Certainly not."

Something like a chuckle had been emitted from the arm-chair as she passed it.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE VICAR AND THE DOCTOR

MRS. MERTON, the wife of the Vicar of Cheriton, was a little, delicate woman with the transparency, if not the neatness, of a Dresden china figure. She was not considered to be of much consequence by Lady Cheriton and the visitors at the Abbey. In fact it was not uncommon for the latter to say,—

“It does seem a pity that your Vicar’s wife does not relieve you of more of the things you do; so many vicars’ wives are invaluable.”

“Oh, my dear, with her health and those children!” Lady Cheriton would reply indulgently, and with a little kindly contempt.

It was possible that a more invaluable “vicaress” would have found the position a difficult one. Things worked admirably at Cheriton, between the mistress of the Abbey and the Vicar. But a good deal of this harmony was due to the distinctly passive rôle of the little wife with the firm mouth and clear blue eyes, who was generally making her children’s frocks, with some volumes of High Anglican literature by her side,—volumes that kept the busy Vicar’s sermons up to date in culture and in quotations.

On the evening on which Lady Cheriton came down from London, Mrs. Merton from the depths of a chintz-covered sofa was listening to her eldest girl repeating some passages

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from Shakespeare, intelligence and delight on the fat, rosy countenance, when the Vicar came strolling in from Even-song, with a clouded brow.

"Say that to father, Mary, it is really wonderfully better now."

"Oh! not yet, Mother."

"Is n't it her bedtime?" asked the Vicar, with unusual want of sympathy.

"Run along, your father wants to speak to me."

A smile of understanding passed between mother and daughter, as the child ran out of the room; but it did not seem that they were right, for Mr. Merton remained silent, gazing at the carpet in front of his chair. He was a tall, fine, ascetic looking man, a good deal older than his wife, a sensitive delicacy written in lines about the mouth and eyes that implied either the capacity for much suffering, or past experience of much pain. Mrs. Merton's white forehead contracted under its pretty, fluffy hair, and she kept glancing at him with sympathy and understanding. At last she said:

"So they have come?"

"Oh yes," said her husband, wearily, "they have come," and he crossed his legs, and balanced the long paper knife between the fingers of his right hand. "I met Mr. Colquhoun this evening, and," with a touch of sarcasm, "the future member has come too, and Lady Anne."

"Well, it is a good thing that Lady Anne has come, at any rate," said Mrs. Merton more cheerfully, taking up her work as she spoke.

"Just after I had got rid of Colquhoun, I met the others in the Park."

"What is he like?" asked Mrs. Merton, a little eagerly.

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Mr. Merton frowned.

"Just what I expected, only more so. The sort of good looks that make people ill-natured. They did not see me, so I did not stop." He paused. "Mr. Colquhoun tried to draw me as to a Roman Catholic member and said: 'Of course I don't like it, but it would be better for us than a Protestant fanatic, like Colonel Stokes.' But what he wants to know is, what is the general opinion here, and owing to this disgusting gossip, that is just the delicate ground which I want to avoid."

Mrs. Merton let her work fall again.

"But, Edward, if we do avoid it, that won't stop it."

He arose as she spoke, and began walking up and down the room with long, nervous strides.

"I can't conceive what to do," he cried.

"Lady Turton called to-day," said his wife, "and I could n't keep her off it. Do you know, I am more sure than ever that it comes from Mrs. Maurice; but what puzzles me is, that it would seem that Mrs. Maurice quotes Mr. Colquhoun. Lady Turton tells me that 'the county,' as she always calls her neighbours, thinks that Lady Cheriton will divorce her husband, and marry this man."

"But both Lady Cheriton and any Roman Catholic know what a sin that would be," replied Mr. Merton, sternly.

"Of course it's not true," said Mrs. Merton, her loyal blue eyes looking startled. "But then Lady Turton said that was no reason for taking him as a member for this division. I can't help seeing," she went on with a subtle feminine smile, "that though Lady Turton looks gloomy, and sighs over Sir Thomas's gloominess, she rather enjoys seeing Lady Cheriton in a difficulty. Of course, she said, dear

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Lady Cheriton had been just a little overbearing, a little too superior, don't you know. But, Edward, what does worry me is, that they have asked Lady Turton to give the prizes at the Flower Show at Hurstwood, a thing Lady Cheriton has done for years."

The Vicar groaned at this detail, and covered his face with his hands.

"And here she comes, absolutely in the dark as to all this nonsense, and I can't conceive who is to tell her."

They were both silent; the suggestion that he should do it was so obvious and painful to them both.

"It might be easier for a woman," said Mr. Merton at length.

"I wonder," said his wife, "if Lady Berringfield is coming down."

"No, no, she wouldn't do it; she is far too cautious, and wisely so," said the Vicar, taking up a book, and trying to read.

"Edward," Mrs. Merton began again, presently, "do you know, I am sure it would be a great mistake to tell her at all."

"Would you let her go on like this?" cried the Vicar.

"No," said Mrs. Merton, sitting up and speaking firmly, "she must be persuaded to drop the election business, for the sake of the party, and then Mr. Dacre will go away, and the whole thing will die down. And she will think—she must be made to think—that all the opposition has been religious, and of course that is at the root of most of it. A woman does not have a perfectly good name for twelve years, for nothing. I really should be afraid of her giving up the whole thing, and going away for good and all, if she found how eagerly these people catch at anything against her, after all these years. I often think I have too low an

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opinion of my fellow creatures, but they have surprised me this time," and the blue eyes were filled with limpid tears.

The Vicar, moved by some hidden feeling, came across and kissed her. Perhaps he felt that there was a special touch of generosity in his wife's championship of Lady Cheriton.

"How would it be," she said, after a moment, looking up at him, "for you to talk it over with Mr. Jinks? He must have heard all about it by now, and he is really to be trusted. And you know she was seeing him a good deal before she went to London."

It seemed a brilliant idea, and gave the Vicar the comfort of action. He decided to go out directly after supper to see the doctor, who was generally to be found smoking his bachelor pipe at that hour.

The doctor, a short, black-haired, red-faced man, was sitting in a low garden chair, admiring his flowers in the dusk, when the Vicar found him.

"Now look at that," he cried, pointing at a big bed of cannas in front of him, and a wonderful effect of tall blue and ghostly white delphiniums against the wood beneath. "Ask Lady Turton, with ten gardeners and an acre of glass, to beat that."

The Vicar nodded absently and sat down by his side.

"My wife thought I had better come and see you," he said, and pressed his fingers on his forehead, and pushed back his black wideawake, as if it oppressed him.

"Well, you don't look up to much. You'd be better if you always did what she told you."

"It's about all this gossip; I wish to Heaven old Snead would keep his seat a little longer. Couldn't you patch him up?"

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"If he had the sense to ask my advice, I'd keep him going one year more, whatever it cost him and my reputation," answered the other, sardonically.

"My wife says it won't do to tell her," said Mr. Merton.

"But then who's to prevent her finding it out? You see the talk is among the two lots she comes across most, the county people and the working people, including many of those on the estate. Lady Turton seems the worst of one lot, and poor Holmstead, who's drinking hard, of the other. I do wish Lady Cheriton had not treated Holmstead so shamefully."

"I doubt if she could help it," said the Vicar.

"She might have made more of a fight. Of course it's grown into a nine days' wonder, and you could hear at any of the little public-houses, any night, a grand account of his going up to London, kneeling at her feet, and her spurning him like so much dirt,—though I don't quite know how you do spurn dirt."

"Still, how could it all come round to her?"

"I don't know exactly, but those things do happen, and she certainly will run a good chance of hearing it, if it comes to an election. But I suspect some female friend will let her hear of it first."

"I can't think what to do," said the Vicar, wearily.

"Do you know," said the doctor, "that I am more worried than I've told a soul as yet. I had just determined to come round to you, to see if you could help me."

CHAPTER XXIX

BEFORE AND AFTER MASS

ANNE dreaded the drive to the distant Catholic church on Sunday morning. There was a Catholic under-coachman at Cheriton, who always drove her to mass in the victoria. This Sunday morning it must mean a long *tête-à-tête* with Henry, and she had managed to avoid being quite alone with him for the past two days. She longed for Monday to be over, for on Monday she had promised to answer his urgent entreaty to allow him to go to her father. Would he repeat those entreaties that still rang strangely in her ears? What were his feelings during those two days? Was he dreading lest his half-terrified appeal to her should meet with her agreement? Did he still cling to her as to a refuge? Perhaps Anne was not far from the mark, when she at moments inclined to the opinion that she and her decision were in the vague background of his consciousness, and that he might, for hours together, forget that Monday had been chosen as a day of fate. Certainly, he did not attempt to disobey her wish to be left quiet and alone.

At breakfast, she was too full of her own thoughts and fears to notice Muriel, or she might have been struck by a curious expression on her cousin's face, as Lady Cheriton glanced through a large pile of letters.

"How absurdly cowardly these people are!" cried Muriel.

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"How terribly afraid of committing themselves! They don't want to have Colonel Stokes as member, but they won't say so."

Henry saw her frown and an expression on her face that puzzled him. "That is always the way at the start," he replied cheerfully, "but those are the very people who, when the cat begins to jump the right way, are the most fervent of all. When the friends we made in London have been down here a short time, they will rouse these people up. Don't you remember that was exactly what Mr. Rupert said would happen?" Mr. Rupert was the member for the neighbouring division, and had been a keen partisan of Henry Dacre's in London.

"Oh yes," said Muriel, a little absently, "and, of course, when Mr. Maurice comes down, we will have a meeting, and they will all rally round us. But certainly they are cautious as to committing their infallible judgments in your behalf. It is curious how many of them find that they can't dine on Thursday, and Lady Turton, who at any other time would have come barefoot rather than not come at all, has a previous engagement. In fact," she added, pushing a mass of notes from her, "I shall have to send into the highways and byways if we are to have a political dinner-party." She laughed, brightly enough to deceive Dacre, and Anne heard her as if her voice came from far away.

But Muriel was having an entirely new experience. Fourteen invitations, and only four acceptances, which included the Mertons, the retiring member himself, Mr. Snead, and his niece. Three or four of the refusals were evidently *bona fide*, and Muriel was determined not to suspect Mrs. Rupert, although there was a curious ring in the very good reasons she gave, why she and her husband could not accept

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It was all the more puzzling as it had been carefully made a non-committal affair, and Dacre had not even been mentioned in the neatly turned notes in which Lady Cheriton asked her friends informally to a small dinner-party.

Muriel had almost forgotten Anne's presence, or she might not have said even so much. But to Dacre she talked with, for her, curious freedom ; and it was evidently a relief to some blind instinct that was oppressing her, to speak exclusively of the political question. She had, when opening her letters, put them into two piles, as was her habit, one of refusals, the other of acceptances; now she gathered them up with a scornful gesture, and rose, and walked to the window. Henry and Anne followed her, and they looked down through the narrow, deep-set mullions, at the red-roofed town nestling beneath. Anne had drawn aside into one window, by herself, and putting her head out, as far as she could reach, drew in the air gratefully. Lady Cheriton leaned against the window-frame, drawn up to her full height, and Henry stood opposite to her, knowing that some anxiety had got hold of him after all. The thought came to him as a sword-thrust—"What if the election were lost!" That did not matter, he felt, so long as she did not suffer. But how intolerable if it were to bring her pain! Then he heard her say to herself in a low, sweet voice, "Dear, beautiful little town! How much better the people are here than those worldly, selfish county folk, who think themselves so deadly important!" Her lip curled, but her eyes softened, and Henry, too, gazed down at the red roofs in a glow of enthusiasm. Then a footman came, to ask how soon Lady Anne would want the carriage. Anne came out of the deep window quickly, and said, half looking at Henry: "I think we ought to start in ten minutes."

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"I thought of bicycling," he answered, with his usual, almost ceremonious respect of manner.

Anne said no more, and left them. She had a beautiful drive; the fresh air caught her face, and, for some time, the trees of the park, and afterwards, the great copses and preserves, gave her shade. Occasionally, wide sweeps of view were spread out before her, as the carriage took her over the hills. There was physical relief, and nerve relief, and yet something of a pathos not to be told, in the sense of Henry's absence. Their last drive together had been missed. She half smiled, and half wished to let herself weep. Although glad, or at least relieved, that he was not with her, she felt now, that she had had a half glint of hope of a possible something passing between them, of a gleam of human feeling before it was all over for ever.

A long stretch of hilly road lay bare behind the carriage. Anne looked back, and began to wonder why she did not see the bicycle. If he were to be in time, he ought to be in sight now. Was it possible that he was not coming; that he had stayed to talk with Muriel? Only those who realise what is the nature of the obligation of the Sunday Mass on Catholics can understand how completely, from their point of view, such an action would justify her darkest fears. Anne tried to stifle the thought. "Oh no, no, surely not that! He must be coming—he must." She shut her eyes. "But if *that* were true, why should he come? No, no," she cried in her heart.

But still no bicycle was in sight.

"He will coast past us in a few minutes," she told herself, as the carriage began to go down the big hill towards the small ugly town, with its two or three factory chimneys, in

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which stood the iron building, the only Catholic chapel for many miles round.

Presently, a figure on a bicycle did appear, coasting fast from the sky-line, but as it gradually became definite, it proved to be that of a total stranger.

Then Anne arrived at the tiny church, and was shown through the rows of chairs to a front seat, where three chairs and three red hassocks made the only division from the sanctuary.

Once kneeling, her joy and relief were untold. Again in the presence of the Tabernacle, Anne's happiness was as that of a child that has been harshly used at school, and once more leans a tired head against its mother. But this joy was far greater, for as the woman had known a deeper suffering, so was the Divine relief proportionate.

The priest came out of the sacristy, and the congregation, composed mostly of Irish factory hands, soon crowded the little building. It seemed to Anne as he began Mass that it was weeks since the previous morning, when she had heard those same words in the Carmelite church:

“I will go unto the altar of God,
To God who giveth joy to my youth.”

Then the priest bowed low as if caught by another thought. And the *Confiteor* with its “*Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*” rang in her ears, and the consequent appeal to the great chorus of intercession, that the family of saints in heaven and the faithful on earth might be one in obtaining the forgiveness of sins.

Anne could not feel alone in such a company, though a gnawing anxiety that would not be stifled was the under-current of her prayers, as the Gospel and the Offertory

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passed, and she could distinguish no sign of Henry being in the church. But then, at last, she felt a movement in the throng around her, the vacant chair by her side was taken, and a dark head was bowed close to hers. The Canon of the Mass began, and the mystery became too sacred to be dwelt on here; and of that secret sacredness Anne's prayers partook also.

After Mass, Anne went to speak to the priest, with a message from Lady Cheriton concerning a poor Irish family in his parish. She half hoped that Henry would have bicycled away meanwhile; that half-hour of kneeling by his side had seemed to her to hold all that she needed. She would rather not be alone with him again after that; the rest could be done in a letter. The trial of a parting interview would thus be spared her. On coming out, and seeing no one at the door, she concluded he had gone on, when looking to the right, she saw that he was waiting for her in the shade.

"I punctured," he exclaimed, coming forward, "just at the top of the park; so I left the bicycle at the lodge, and walked over; that is why I was so late."

Anne met his eyes as he spoke, and read in them a deeper sense of her presence than he had betrayed during the last two days. She shivered and looked away. The little knot of rough girls and rougher men stared after them with not unfriendly curiosity, as the victoria drove away with the handsome couple inside. For a few moments, they talked of the bicycle, with precise questioning and answer as to details, until the topic faded into silence, and the carriage began to crawl up the hill. Henry jumped out to relieve the horses, but at the top he got back into the carriage, and they moved on rapidly. Anne's heart beat like a hammer.

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"Do you think," she began in quick, earnest tones, ignoring the painful scene in London, when he had pressed her so strangely to marry him at once,— "do you think that we could talk a little now, of the mistake we made at Cobden?" And then, not waiting for his answer, and feeling that the end must come quickly, she added : " You see, my father is coming home in a few weeks, and I think we had better, or, rather, I had better tell him at once that we have had time to know that it was a mistake."

Henry bowed his head for a moment, and groaned.

"I feel," she went on, speaking very quietly, "that you thought it was true, but do you know" (she was looking away over the woods, and her voice was sweet, clear, and continuous as became a narrative) "even then I had doubts—not for a moment of your truth, but of your knowing yourself. And the strange thing was that I felt you would have cared for me, possibly, even, very much, if something else had not happened. Something filled your mind so that you did not know me, and we had missed the moment when it might have been. I have often meant since that morning at Cobden, to tell you that I could not be your wife ; but I was weak, and I did not. I thought, for some little time after we were engaged, that if I had refused you in Cobden wood, you would have come back to me. It was my mistake. I thought, too, for many days, that, in time, the mist between us would be dispersed, and that everything would come right. It was another mistake. Now all is over, and, if you consent, I will give you back your promise, and we will say a real 'Good-bye,' a real 'God be with you.'"

He groaned again, and murmured half indistinctly:
"I leave it all to you."

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And Anne, feeling how impossible it was for him to say more, how humiliating must be his position in his own eyes, hastened to relieve him, to fill up his embarrassed and terrible silence.

"It has been," she said, "so like a dream owing to many things,—to our engagement not being made public, to our rarely meeting, except in a London crowd, and our not having known each other even for three months. All this will make it pass as if nothing had happened. But I shall want to know about you, and I shall not be told much. So I want to talk now of your life and your future. I have been afraid, Henry, that the mistake — our mistake — might have taken the shine off some of the things we planned together. You won't let it, will you? If you have all the success I know you will have, you will keep the best things first, won't you? Do you feel as I do, that the London world is more deadening to one's ideals than we expected it to be?"

The sound of her voice, the strange, new, outspoken words, carried Henry back to that day in the wood, and listening to the decision that set him free, while he knew, in his sober senses, with a hard self-contempt, that he would not have it otherwise, a bitter feeling of regret was taking possession of him. Kneeling by her side at Mass, with, at first, an unwilling consciousness that her prayers were for him, the slumbering soul had awakened within him. Something stirred undoubtedly, and he found that he knew things about himself for the first time, and must tell her.

"Deadening? Oh, if you but knew, how you would despise me! It is all gone; I don't know if it was there when I used to talk to you, but I only care for success now. It all fell away somehow, and I took for granted

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that high motives were there long after they had left me. Do you know," and his face as he turned to her had a haggard look, "my faith must be going, or gone, in the same way, and I don't mind. I have nothing to keep me from yielding to any sin. Other men, surely, have principles, and keep to them for their own sakes, without being religious: but I can't. Oh, you are well rid of me—God knows ! How dare I now to talk to you of myself ? It is an impertinence, but it would be blasphemous for me to speak of you. There is only one course open to me, and that is to go away from here at once—that, at least, I can do."

Anne was silent. Then after a few minutes she said :

"I am not afraid of what you have told me. The very fact that you say it shows that it is not all true. You see," she added, turning to him with a light shining in her eyes through tears, "you have never known yourself, but I knew you, because I loved you."

These last words decided him. Now he felt that he must go at once. They were in sight of the lodge.

"I must stop here," he said. "You must let me say good-bye here. I left my bicycle with the lodge-keeper, and he said that he would get the tyre blown out. I shall ride to Hurstwood Junction. There is one Sunday afternoon train to London from there, I know." He paused. "Tell everybody that I have bad news, and must go to my mother. Tell—." There was a long silence. "Tell—," again silence,—"Lady Cheriton the truth, and say that I have gone away."

There was a look on his face that might, for very pity, have moved a passing stranger, and it was hard for Anne to bear it, even although she did not realise that she was already

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forgotten. They reached the lodge, and Henry called out to the coachman to put him down. A moment later he stood alone in the open gate. The lodge-keeper came round the corner with the bicycle, as the carriage drove out of sight with Anne. Henry was busying himself with the tyre that had been punctured, when he heard himself called:

“Dacre, Dacre! stop a minute,” cried Colquhoun, coming out of the lodge with his ambling step. “I thought you would come back this way, so I walked to meet you. I must have a few words with you before luncheon.”

“I can’t stop,” said Henry, his eyes still fixed on the tyre. “I have had news and must go to my mother,” and unwillingly he raised his terribly altered face to the scrutiny of the man by his side.

“My dear fellow,” replied Colquhoun, in a voice as soothing as a woman’s, “there will be no train from the junction till four o’clock this afternoon.” Then, calling to the lodge-keeper, he said: “Thwaite, will you send Mr. Dacre’s bicycle down to the Abbey? we shall walk. Whatever the matter is,” he lowered his voice to an undertone, “you must not be a fool. One would think you had had a sun-stroke.”

Henry held on to the bicycle with a nervous clutch. “Colquhoun, let me go. I ought, as a gentleman, to go away. I shall ride to the junction.”

“Look here,” protested Colquhoun, “as a gentleman you are bound to stay. Your going like this is theatrical, and absurd; it will do harm, and make talk.”

“I don’t see that that matters,” said Henry, sadly. “No one could suffer from the talk except myself. Just say what is true, that I have had news, and am going to my mother.”

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"Don't you know," asked Horace, emphatically, "who will suffer if you go off like this? with whom the tongues will busy themselves?"

Dacre looked up in genuine surprise, and Colquhoun stared back at him, saying in a low voice, "Lady Cheriton will suffer."

A swift flush covered the young man's face with a deep dye. "Why?" he challenged him, angrily.

"Be quiet," muttered Horace, "your voice is too loud. Give your bicycle to Thwaite."

Henry did so mechanically, and walked into the trees on the side of the road, followed by Colquhoun, who began in his usual conversational tone:

"It's a confoundedly absurd state of things, but the fact is, a ridiculous gossip has grown up in this antediluvian spot, about you and our hostess."

"Impossible," cried Henry.

"Well, after all, I don't know," said Horace, putting his glass to his eye, and glancing at his companion, "that I am so very much surprised. But having through your own fault or not got her into this hole, you are bound as a gentleman to see if you can't help her out of it."

"How can I possibly help?" cried Henry, whose nerve and temper were failing, at this second sudden stress on them in a short time. "If I am the offending cause, I ought to go away.—If these scandal-mongers must spend their time in this way, let them say that she sent me away."

After a moment's silence Colquhoun said:

"It's more than likely that you will have to go away for a rest cure, if for nothing else; but can't you see that you ought to go quietly, and that there must be some good ex-

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planation to offer, of your giving up the attempt to be their member? Believe me, I 've known the world for some time, and I can assure you that sudden moves are a mistake. Don't do anything out of the common; don't excite notice. If a situation grows awkward, get out of it as quietly as if there were no awkwardness, and people will begin to suspect that the awkwardness was in their own imaginations."

"But," said Henry, stopping and facing him, "I can't go back to Cheriton. I told Lady Anne that I would n't. O heavens! What a muddle!"

"Never mind what you and Lady Anne said to each other. She is a very charming, devout young person, but she knows nothing of the world, in such a question as this. Your duty now is to think of Lady Cheriton."

"Good God!" cried Henry, forgetting himself, "I never do anything else!"

"I know," said Colquhoun, calmly; "poor fellow, I 'm awfully sorry for you, but I feel far more for her, and you must consider her, not yourself."

"It is obvious that I ought to go. It is impertinent for me to be with her. What would she feel if I betrayed myself?"

"My dear fellow, you bewilder and amaze me. Do you suppose that she doesn't know, didn't know from the first? Why, it was patent to your humble servant long ago. Yours are not eyes that keep that sort of secret."

"But then," said Dacre, in a voice of agony. "But then ——"

"But then!" echoed Horace, with contemptuous mockery.

Henry was silent, and remained standing, covering his face with his hands. Colquhoun turned to him, and spoke sternly, with the man-of-the-world conviction of his own standard of morality:

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"Surely, Dacre, you will not shirk the responsibility now? What right have you to assume that that lonely woman may not have given you a position in her heart which, as a man of honour, you are bound to act up to?"

He paused and looked up.

Henry slowly took his hands from his face, and drew in a long breath of the summer air. Colquhoun stepped back, unpleasantly struck with the expression in his companion's eyes, now lit up with a strange joy.

The Colquhouns of this world never fail to despise in their hearts those who, like Henry, having seen the better things, fall to their own level.

CHAPTER XXX

A TRIAL TO FAITH

SMOOTHLY and swiftly the victoria took Anne through the wooded park, and the shade was grateful to her tear-blinded eyes, though the sunlight too seemed mellow and golden, for she was rejoicing in a thankful heart. Her own story of love was over; her own life stretched grey and indistinct before her; but come what might, the glory of the heavens would be above her, and He to whom she had committed her way would bring it to pass. Henry was safe; Muriel was safe. The offering she had made in the Carmelite church had been accepted. He had seen his own danger, had made the sacrifice, and had gone away. Anne pictured him, already speeding towards the junction, his beautiful face firmly set with resolution. He would go away now to his own home, and then back to work. He was made for work, for action, and in that only could she envy him. For the success that she was sure awaited him, for the career she had hoped to help forward, she could feel no envy, no painful sense of contrast with her own life, that would be passed in the shade.

Anne, though only twenty-three, was not possessed of that sanguine, gaudy-coloured view of life that makes greatness seem enviable. She wanted Henry to do great things, to use his vital forces for their appointed work, but she guessed intuitively what such a life entailed. No, there

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was pity and yearning over what he must suffer and do in his future life, as, on this morning of farewell, it seemed to lie stretched out as a whole. It would be good, noble, brilliant, and successful before God and man. Of that she had no doubt. But what would be the measure of his allotted pain? What the suffering that must needs lead him heavenward? He would live down his love for Muriel, his chivalrous shame at the way in which he had treated herself. Of that she felt sure; and as to the rest, she must be content to leave him.

“ O well for him whose will is strong,
He suffers, but he will not suffer long;
He suffers, but he cannot suffer wrong.”

These words were in her mind as she stepped out of the carriage, with a bright glow on her face, and went up to her room.

Anne wanted a few moments in which to decide how she could best tell Muriel what had happened, that the engagement was at an end and that Henry had gone away. Having settled that it would be best to tell her in a note, she wrote one, tore it up, then wrote another, which met with the same fate. By that time she saw that it was nearly two o'clock. The peace and joy of the drive were 'being lost; her cheeks were burning; it was really not easy at all to tell her news quite simply to Muriel,—and she must do it before luncheon. At last she hurried from her room, anxious to catch her cousin in the drawing-room, before Colquhoun, who was always late, should come in. She ran down the great front stairs, and stopped aghast opposite the big window.

Henry Dacre and Horace Colquhoun were walking

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quickly towards the Abbey, coming down the drive from the park, under the long avenue of chestnut-trees.

Anne stood there feeling sick and faint, a violent reaction against the mood of a few minutes ago taking possession of her. Her faith seemed to turn to bitterness. She moved slowly away, went back to her room, and knelt down by her little altar, pressing her lips till they almost bled, on the foot of the bronze crucifix that had belonged to her sister Mary. Inarticulate and hopeless was her prayer, blind yet desperate the effort of her will. She heard a knock at her door, and, opening it, saw to her astonishment Colquhoun's benignant and paternal countenance.

"You will forgive me," he said; "I must have a word alone with you. The anteroom is empty—will you come there?"

Owing partly to having had hardly any food that morning, Anne felt a little faint; but in spite of this and of the noises in her head, she had a fictitious sense of clearness, in listening to Colquhoun. Nothing could have been more delicately or considerately expressed than his explanation on the situation in which they found themselves, through this disgraceful and wide-spread calumny. It never occurred to her to cross-question him as to the grounds of his information; and she received, as perhaps he wished, an exaggerated impression of the extent to which the lies against her cousin had been circulated.

Appalled by the horror of the situation, Anne was the more inclined to listen to the man of the world, whose common sense she unwillingly recognised. It was quite clear, Horace said, that Henry must go away soon, but it was extremely difficult to see what must be done about the election. Horace tried to persuade her that for Lady Cheriton's sake

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there must be nothing abrupt or sudden. It would, he said, be perfectly absurd for Henry to scuttle away on a bicycle without his luggage.

"Nothing, of course," said Horace, eyeing her closely, "must be said to Lady Cheriton," and then, perhaps in time to hear the words, Lady Cheriton's maid was in the room.

"I wanted just to tell you, my lady, that Mr. Jinks is with her ladyship; she did not feel quite well, and when you have finished luncheon, he would like to speak to you."

"Shall I come at once?"

"No, my lady; he won't come down for another twenty minutes. Shall I tell him that you will see him here in twenty minutes?"

"Oh, tell Mr. Jinks to come here in a quarter of an hour."

Anne was thankful for the excuse for a hurried meal, and as Henry had not come down, she was spared the ghastly absurdity of having to eat luncheon in his company.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE VICAR IS TOO LATE

MURIEL felt very tired when she came back from the vicarage on Sunday morning. She climbed slowly up to her sitting-room in the tower, and sat down in a low chair by the window, through which she could look away to the hills on the north. She did not look at them now, but shut her weary eyes and sighed. Had she, in talking with the Mertons, betrayed some slight irritation as to her neighbours, or some guilty sense of her own past cowardice with regard to Holmstead? Something had jarred while she was with them,—she could not tell what, but she was annoyed with herself. Was she becoming the ordinary foolish woman who carried her feelings on her sleeve for her friends to peck at, as the average human being will peck, not from meditated ill-will, but from careless activity of mind or temper?

There had been no pecking on the Mertons' part certainly, but she fancied some sort of pity and embarrassment in their manner. Yet they had spoken in a thoroughly large-minded way of having a Roman Catholic member, only they had urgently pressed her to remember that others would not feel as they did. There was evidently a stronger Protestant opposition already active than Muriel had anticipated, and she saw that they more than feared that Lady Cheriton would only ride for a fall if she per-

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sisted. But through all their plain speaking, she had felt that they were terribly embarrassed, and this was exceedingly annoying.

If the dull old Protestant electors of the division would not take a Catholic without extreme pressure from such leaders as Mr. Maurice, or if, indeed, they kicked altogether, why could not the Mertons take such a situation simply? After all, did they believe that she was so spoilt that she could not brook any contradiction? Lady Cheriton felt angry with her clergyman and his wife.

It was the more annoying, as she had been very happy in church. Muriel had prayed earnestly, as men and women do who feel a cloud of anxiety growing about them. The Mertons often regretted the absence of any doctrinal education in Lady Cheriton, and her curious facility for taking up new views, without any sense of their discrepancy with the church principles she professed. Still, as Mrs. Merton had once said :

“Do you know, though she doesn’t listen to the sermon, I am sure she prays.”

But the peace of the service had been lost to Muriel, as soon as she got to the vicarage, and the tiresome political question had been raised.

As she sat in her tower sitting-room afterwards, her thoughts dwelling with irritation on Mrs. Merton’s anxious friendliness of manner, and Mr. Merton’s evident wish to postpone discussion, a servant came in with two letters on a salver. They were small dirty envelopes, “To Lady Cheriton” being scrawled in a large hand on one, while on the other an attempt at “The Countess of Cheriton” was much blotted.

Muriel was quite accustomed to letters from her poor

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neighbours, and took them without surprise. But no sooner had she opened and read the first, than her face became as pale as if she were going to faint, and she could hardly decipher the second letter.

The first was from Holmstead, the second anonymous. Holmstead's had evidently been written under the influence of drink, but was quite coherent. The other was a raving religious rant. Both told her in the coarse, unvarnished way of low, rough minds, that they knew she was trying to thrust her Popish lover into Parliament, as their member.

Muriel struggled to keep herself from unconsciousness ; her breathing was difficult, her hands quite cold. She held on to the iron stanchion of the window, and pressed her forehead against it. It had come upon her, this blow, as suddenly as a telegram can announce an unexpected death. But she fought against it bravely — no, no, Holmstead was drunk. The anonymous writer, he was drunk, too. It was incredible, impossible, that such a story should be believed, after all these years of a spotless life, and a spotless reputation. No, it was nonsense. She was ill, nervous, imaginative. All sorts of people got anonymous letters from lunatics ; it was quite common ; it was absurd for her to mind it.

She sat down and became quieter. Poor, wretched Holmstead — what had he sunk to, that he should do such a thing ?

But she was still very pale and faint, and if it were not such a long distance from the window across the room to the bell, she might ring, perhaps, and get somebody to bring something. She was not quite sure that she had not rung the bell, when the door was opened again by the footman,

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and instantly after him, nearly as pale as herself, appeared Mr. Merton.

Muriel pulled herself together and rose, grasping the greasy letters in one hand. The door shut behind the footman, and Mr. Merton cried in tones of unmistakable anguish:

"I am too late to stop it. Holmstead's wife thought I might be in time."

"Poor woman!" said Muriel, almost lightly. "I am afraid he is really mad. I thought at first it was drink, but it is too coherent for that."

She looked, as she spoke, more and more keenly at the clergyman's face, as her powers were gradually restored. What she saw there made her tremble.

"You have heard of this before?" she asked sternly.

He put his hand to his forehead for a moment's miserable silence, then, with a deep sense of guilt, "Yes."

"Is it Holmstead's own pet delusion?" asked Muriel, sitting down on a huge tapestry armchair, as if it were a seat of judgment, "or do other people say it?"

"Other people are scoundrels enough——"

"To say it too," continued Muriel, leaning her head against the chair, as if she wished to be quite comfortable, her white hands lying idly on her lap, her great eyes looking mercilessly at the nervous, delicate, suffering face of the man before her.

"Is this said among the lower classes only, or also among the upper?"

"Also, among a set——"

"Led by Lady Turton," said Muriel, again finishing his sentence. "Have you any idea where it originated?"

"I think in London; my wife thinks it comes from Mrs. Maurice."

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"Quite right, I am sure," agreed Muriel. "How long has it been down here?"

"I can't tell," he replied; "it seemed to spring up suddenly, in two or three different quarters. Holmstead and Lady Turton, and—" he hesitated, "but it is too impossible. Mr. Colquhoun is quoted also."

"Why impossible?"

"We are not friends," stammered the Vicar, "but I can't, I absolutely decline to believe it of him."

"But I do," said Muriel, quickly; "it is so very likely. Who else heard of this?"

"Mr. Jinks heard it about the same time at Hurstwood."

"So you all knew it?" said the judicial voice from the great chair, and an awful silence followed.

Mr. Merton felt that an immeasurable distance had been put between her and their agonised sympathy, and longing to help her. All past friendship seemed to have been long ago, and counted for nothing now.

Muriel turned languidly in the great chair, and said in quiet undertones of complete coldness:

"Why did nobody tell me?"

Mr. Merton looked away from the white face contrasting so strongly with the cloud of black hair, the head supported stiffly against its tapestry background. He was not conscious of how mercilessly beautiful a picture his perceptions were engraving in his memory, to cause him mental pain in the years yet to come. The blue green of the distant hills relieved the tension of his eyes, and as he looked towards them, he could speak more freely:

"We thought it too low and insignificant a thing to trouble you with; lies die quickly. We thought that you need never know of it."

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"But the election?" said Muriel, in a quiet negative voice.

"We thought that would drop on account of the religion."

There was silence for a moment, then judgment was pronounced, not without a touch of the impertinence of a great lady.

"You meant well, no doubt, but it was cruel kindness," and slowly and distinctly, "a great blunder."

She stood up then, and said no more. Mr. Merton came forward, and shook hands, not looking at her, and left the room.

Then she moved quickly to the window nearest to her looking to the south, and clung to the iron bar that divided it, struggling still not to let the flood of anguish overwhelm her. The years of toil, of self-denial, and, most of all, her resistance to the one great temptation long ago—what had her goodness done for her, what her long years of self-restraint? The tact, the care, the cleverness that had built up her very good name had proved useless. Little things and great things connected with this new horror crowded in on her mind, out of all due proportion. But worst of all was the struggle against an unmanageable sense of shame. She could not throw off the feeling that she was a sham, a wretched delusion that had been found out. The beautiful, noble-minded woman of wonderful, shining virtue, who unconsciously had been her own ideal of herself in the background of her mind, seemed never to have existed, now that it was no longer reflected in the minds of those about her. It was a dense, living blackness at first; but gradually things became distinguishable, first to her physical, and then to her moral perceptions.

First she saw clearly the red, green-dappled roofs of

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the little town, shining in the sun, and her wounded heart yearned and sickened over it. Truly, it might have been a great subject for an artist — the lonely woman in her high tower, leaning back against the stone-work of ten centuries ago, looking down with her beautiful face turned into one tearless image of agony, tearing up from the roots of her wounded heart the only place on earth that she had loved, the one set of her fellow creatures in whom she had believed.

Down under those roofs how many who had begged of her, fawned on her, and made her think they loved her, were passing her name from mouth to mouth with coarse easy jests about her and a Popish lover! A Popish lover! The words stuck in her mind. The misery became unbearable. She turned back from the window. She must not think such thoughts. She must nerve herself to face the practical situation before her.

It was now that the hard-earned habits of self-command, and her natural gifts for action, stood her in good stead. Without losing herself in conjecture, in wonderment, or in dwelling on her individual enemies, not turning to any thought of revenge, she simply asked herself if any good could now be done, or any of the harm mitigated.

Physically, she was hardly capable of the struggle to master her ideas and form some plan of action. Would it be wisest to send for Mr. Biddulph? It would, a short time ago, have been her first impulse in any difficulty. But now she at once rejected it. She was avoiding in her own mind those weeks in London, and all that had passed between her and Anne and Dacre. Had not Mr. Biddulph been watching and criticising her all that time — possibly,

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unkindest cut of all, misjudging her too? How embarrassed he had been in their last talk together! No, she could not dwell on Mr. Biddulph now, lest she should become morbid in suspicion, and lose her self-control. She felt ill, so very ill, and she must not give way. Then the first perception of action came to her. She was wrong in fighting against illness; probably the best thing to do was to be ill — to be ill, and to send for Lord Cheriton.

“Good God!” she cried with half a laugh, “am I come to that?” But she felt convinced that the inspiration was a true one.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE CEDARS ARE FALLEN

FOSTER, Lady Cheriton's maid, was meanwhile waiting in the bedroom above, to help her mistress to get ready for luncheon, when she heard her call up the turret stair from the sitting-room below. Foster hurried down and found her half fainting on a chair. She helped her up-stairs, and laid her with some difficulty on the heavily curtained four-post bed.

"Don't make a fuss, but send for Mr. Jinks," said a faint voice, and Muriel, giving up the struggle, collapsed completely.

But she was herself again when Mr. Jinks puffed up the steep steps to her room.

After a little medical enquiry and reply, Muriel said with a sweet, sad smile: "Mr. Jinks, I was a coward in the spring, and I was so relieved when your specialist did not think the operation necessary. I am afraid now that he was wrong, and that you were right."

"Would you like another opinion—Sir John Hopkins perhaps?"

"Yes, I want you to send for him at once. I can't bear suspense."

Mr. Jinks was surprised, and still more so, when he found that he was also to tell Lord Cheriton that he, Jinks, would be happier if he would come down next day to meet the

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great doctor. Nor did Mr. Jinks's tasks end here, for he was at once to seek out Lady Anne, and give it as his professional opinion that Lady Cheriton ought to remain quite alone, except for her husband, and that all visitors had better leave the Abbey. After that Lady Cheriton would see Lady Anne herself.

Mr. Jinks had yet another task, in his character of family doctor and friend. He was to drive that afternoon to the house of the retiring member, Mr. Snead, "and put the whole situation before him, the violent religious opposition, and what else you know," and he felt the dark eyes of his patient looking up sternly at his face, through the shadows of the grim, curtained bedstead.

"You will tell him that I am to have a dangerous operation, almost at once."

"Not dangerous I think; I do not now take nearly as serious a view of the matter as I did in the spring," murmured the doctor. "You must have been seriously ill by now, if I had been right then. I am thankful to own myself mistaken."

But he knew that he should obey, and say "dangerous."

"Then will you ask Mr. Snead if he could not solve the difficulty by announcing that he has consented to keep the seat for at least another year?"

Mr. Jinks bowed before the dominant will and acute intelligence; but perhaps the overwhelming sympathy with which he had entered the sick-room was, if not chilled, braced into action, rather than melted into sentiment. At length he turned to call Foster from below, and give her his directions.

"One moment," said the voice, so physically weak and morally strong,—and a white hand drew back the heavy

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curtain. "Let my cousin see that I don't want any fuss about their leaving on account of my health. It is natural, is n't it, that they came down from Saturday to Monday?"

Jinks was a shrewd, experienced man, and could take his cue as well as anybody. But his mind might be said to be fairly full of directions, and he only hoped he should make no serious blunder.

The effect of the draught that Mr. Jinks gave her kept Muriel in a heavy doze till nearly six o'clock. Then she sat up, suddenly awake, as if somebody had called her name.

"It is n't true! it can't be true! Why should they say it? Oh, why should they say it? He has never said a word to me, he has never ventured to show me the least — Why of course not. He is in love with Anne, he is engaged to Anne. He can't help his eyes. I've known several men with eyes like his. It was only gratitude, only friendship, I know. I can't bear this; it is intolerable."

The wave of misery seemed to overwhelm her. She was horribly mortified with herself. Had she really given her enemies any excuse? Had she, could she, have hurt Anne? She had cared for so few people, but she had cared for Anne. Why hadn't she thought more of her during those weeks in London? Could she honestly think now that Anne had been so very happy in her engagement?

Muriel could not understand herself as she looked back at the rush of those busy weeks. It appeared now for the first time,—and her cheeks tingled at the thought,—that she had been constantly talking with Henry, and the reverential look of his eyes seemed to cast a shadow over the past London season.

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"Why, I gave them a sitting-room on purpose that they might be alone! I thought, if I thought at all about it, that they were there a great deal. Oh no, it's nonsense, he is so good—he—" but here another thought broke in. "Had he been so very unlike all other young men, since they had been in London?" Little impressions, occasional words of his own, of Colquhoun's about him, came back to her now, showing, as Horace had once said, that Dacre had taken to London life like a duck to the water. Oh, what harm had she done? What in the name of kindness and friendship had she done to Anne and to Henry? Had not even James Maurice warned her, though she had not understood it at the time. But O Anne! Anne's pale face, her increasing thinness! Mr. Biddulph had tried to make her notice both. Why had not James Maurice and Mr. Biddulph spoken out, and really helped her? She sat up against her pillows, her hands folded in front of her, in a stillness of agony. What a picture of her life, of herself, seemed to rise before her! Lady Cheriton, then, had indulged in a flirtation, and had lost her good name. She had always thought that no woman need lose her good name. And Muriel had, in blind, selfish, heartlessness, taken her lover from Anne.

Humbled, weak, helpless, she lay lower and lower, feeling as if she were out in the bare world, alone and helpless, the great arch of the heavens very far off. All that was good and happy in her life was gone. What came next? She was too miserable to see more than that all she cared for and valued was falling about her. Yet her great beauty was never more striking than when she lay there now, with no external sign of moral weakness. She still looked strong in mind though weak in body, still looked as if the force of her will made inaction unnatural and forced.

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It was late in the evening before Muriel asked for Anne. It seemed that Lady Anne was in the tower room already, and she came in a moment.

She had been thankful to escape as soon as dessert appeared on the table, on the excuse that Muriel might need her. That little dinner, with a *menu* shortened by Colquhoun's orders, had been a masterpiece of quiet society chat on his part, for which the other two could not but feel grateful.

Anne was dressed in a plain white silk dinner gown. Her hair had had little attention, and strayed about the fair face, that was slightly flushed. Her eyes as she came into the dark room held the spiritual light that is full of pain, not joy, a look that has been very rarely caught in pictures of the saints.

Muriel had made no plans as to what she should say to Anne; but as the evening deepened, she had begun to wish for her presence, and then to dread it, and then to desire it again. Now, when the curtain was gently put aside, and the candles in the heavy gold candlesticks shed their light on Anne's beautiful face, Muriel shrank. Until to-night Anne's love, and her possible pain, had never been very vivid to her cousin. During the last two hours they had become the chief facts of all.

"This is sudden, isn't it, Anne?" The tones were quite her usual ones. "I never told you that Jinks wanted me to have an operation in the spring. I went to a great doctor who considered it unnecessary, and I thought no more about it. I am sure now that it ought to be done, and I want to have Hopkins, and Cheriton here to meet him. But I suppose Jinks told you."

"Yes, he did, and I was horrified. But I could not understand; I do hope it won't be serious."

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"I think it will be. I don't know that it matters. Have you told the men that they must go?"

"Yes, and Mr. Colquhoun seemed rather surprised. Of course Henry understands, but it seems that Mr. Colquhoun thinks that Lord Cheriton may want him."

"Yes," said Muriel, faintly, pushing her hair off her forehead, and looking up at the roof of the great bed, "I thought that might be the difficulty. Anne, would you mind going to him this evening, and telling him from me that I wish to be alone with Lord Cheriton?" — then, half to herself she added: "for the first time for ten years. I would have begged you to stay, Anne, except for that."

"Oh yes, I quite see, dear. I will tell Mr. Colquhoun. I mustn't say, may I, that I wish to Heaven he would never come back?"

Muriel almost smiled at the energy of Anne's words.

"Perhaps he never will," she said.

And then, as if Colquhoun was not worth further thought, she passed to other things, and sent messages to Jane.

At last her voice broke a little, and Anne bent over to kiss her. The longing to speak, to break through the barriers, to tell Anne the truth, and to ask it from her in return, was unbearable. To let her go like this was intolerable: but Muriel's facility for speaking what she did not mean, went with a terrible impediment to revealing her imprisoned heart. The dark eyes, dumb, hungry, and in anguish, were all that Anne had to read, while the spiritual sweetness, the womanly love, and—was it the passion of pity, or the strength of forgiveness, or both?—that strove in Anne's clear blue eyes, looked down upon Muriel, but could not reach the wound in her heart.

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But Muriel, when she was alone and terrified, knelt up in the summer moonlight, amid the white pillows of the bed, and her soul "caught on to the skirts of God," as she prayed for Anne and for herself.

CHAPTER XXXIII

A LONELY SOUND

L ORD CHERITON arrived at the Abbey, about six o'clock the next evening, and drove up from the station with the great physician who was to see his wife.

Sir John Hopkins knew little of general gossip, and had only a faint recollection that he had heard Lord Cheriton alluded to as the "virtuous Earl," on more than one occasion. If he had not had this dim memory in his mind, he would have been very favourably impressed with the stout, florid, but dignified nobleman, who said little, but a little that was courteous and appropriate, during the short drive. Lord Cheriton generally controlled himself before total strangers, and one reason why he disliked coming to Cheriton was, that he had by no means altogether lost the sense of what was befitting in appearances generally, to his position in his own domains. It was the more of a strain as he chafed intensely at his own perception that nowhere was it more obvious that he was *le mari de Madame* than at Cheriton, where he could see on every side his wife's admirable control over all the matters which he persistently neglected.

It was a relief to think that Horace was there to soothe his vanity, and to give a vent to the weak, bullying conversation in which he threatened to do all manner of things

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to crush Muriel, which never, so far, had got beyond the threatening. Also, it would be amusing to learn from Horace what new move of the game had caused her ladyship to make the family doctor summon him down in a way that he could not refuse, though Jinks had not perilled his reputation, by insisting on the danger of Lady Cheriton's state of health, or on the absolute necessity of a specialist's opinion.

Mr. Jinks, red, stout, and all that a country doctor should be, was waiting in the gallery to receive the great pale, intellectual-faced man, who looked all that a London specialist should look.

The two medical men walked on together. Lord Cheriton muttered to himself, "What a d——d comedy!" and turned to ask the butler for Mr. Colquhoun.

"He left this morning, your lordship, by the nine o'clock train."

Lord Cheriton's face flushed scarlet, and he muttered rapidly in a very low voice, "D—— him, d—— her, d—— them!"

The butler waited, then quietly observed, with the deepest and most respectful bow, that her ladyship wished to see him in the tower sitting-room.

"Bring a brandy and soda to the smoking-room," was the reply.

Indeed, his courage wanted support. He could not think what she was up to now, letting Horace go without telling him that he, Lord Cheriton, was coming down. It was an intolerable trick. He would have to spend the evening with the two doctors. But worst of all, he would have to see his wife alone, and be sent for up to the *sanctum sanctorum*, as he and Horace called the tower sitting-room,

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to receive her commands on things in general. Or was she perhaps going to upbraid him, reproach him at last? The years of silence made such a prospect terrible indeed. And it would be so wise and so like her, to be ill first, to give herself every advantage.

"Tell her ladyship that I will come up in half an hour."

Brandy and soda twice, constant watching of the clock, longing for Horace.

"Rather like a dentist's waiting-room!" and he laughed at that, and thought how it would amuse Horace. "So they were all made to turn out this morning. I wonder if Horace has discovered his blunder as to Dacre yet, and how he looked, when they said he was engaged to Lady Anne."

But though he laughed, it was a matter on which he got irritable, for Colquhoun had certainly been impertinent.

Lord Cheriton at last mounted the turret stairs, and found himself in the sitting-room. He had no eyes for the glories of the summer evening, or the great view from the tower which he had rarely seen of late years. He managed to get to a chair and to say, "I'm so sorry you're ill," with only a dim sense of the figure on the sofa.

"Thank you," said Muriel; "I thought it best to have Sir John. But before he comes up I want you to read these two letters, and to advise me on a very unpleasant matter. One is from Holmstead, and the other from some ranting Protestant."

Lord Cheriton felt easier at this opening.

"The letters are on the table by you."

It showed his wife's clearness of head that, thinking of him as she must, she should believe it to be of any use to

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appeal to his instincts as a gentleman. No doubt, in any case, it would have answered at the moment, but now his feeling of relief as he read the letters helped his wrath.

He was red with anger, but he turned, and looked at her quite naturally.

"What does it matter?" he spluttered; "put them in the fire and think no more about it."

It even struck him as strange that for so mean a thing her face showed signs of pain, and, he thought, of tears.

It was the first time that he had seen her weak, and human for many years. And his breath caught. Yes, Colquhoun was right, she was indeed changed.

"But unfortunately," Muriel went on, in a quite calm, business-like voice, "it is only the echo of what has come from their betters."

"It's impossible," said Cheriton, sternly, and with intense conviction.

"It would have been impossible," said Muriel quickly, "if it had not originated from one almost of the family. From what motives I cannot yet see, it has been the doing of Mr. Colquhoun."

Then, as if exhausted she lay back, and shut her eyes. She did not for a moment expect him to believe it, and she was preparing for a struggle; but he had reasons of his own for thinking it, besides his greater knowledge of Colquhoun's character, about which he had no illusions.

"The scoundrel," shouted Cheriton; and then walking up and down, "so that was what he meant. I'll never set eyes on him again. I'll——"

But, looking at his wife, a certain fear came over him. He must not be emotional, he must try and be as quiet

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as she looked; the ground on which he stood was too delicate.

Muriel now slightly sketched the story of the progress of the slander, as she had gained it through a talk with Mrs. Merton. They had traced it to Mr. Colquhoun, then from him it had passed to Mrs. Maurice, from Mrs. Maurice to Lady Turton, and then to Lady Turton's county gossips; then again, it had gone from Colquhoun's valet to Holmstead, from Holmstead to the society of the Cheriton Arms. It was all so simple. As to the election, Muriel told him Mr. Snead would keep his seat. She had heard it only this morning.

"That's a pity," said Cheriton; "the engagement to Lady Anne should have been announced, and the election pulled through."

Muriel knew that he was right, but then the question shot through her, "Would that engagement ever be announced at all?"

"I doubt if it could have been done anyhow in this Protestant county," she said indifferently. "But it is getting late; there is the dressing-bell. I have one thing more to say, Cheriton, which you will be glad to hear. I have made a mistake in staying on here."

Lord Cheriton stood at the window, and looked down on the valley.

"The position is an impossible one," she continued. "I fancied that I had made myself indispensable to these people. I have had my lesson. I thought too—" a deep colour flushed over her face for a moment; she paused, and then went on—"that it was my duty to keep my place in the world as your wife."

The man at the window gave a start, and half turned towards her, with a smothered exclamation.

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But she went on quite calmly : "It would no doubt be the more perfect way to do that still. But I am convinced now that I am not obliged to aim at what I can no longer bear, at what is slowly killing me. I am going to ask you to arrange for a separation, though if you will let me choose my own time, it had better not be for a few months—not until this absurd story has died down."

"Muriel, don't, for God's sake don't! Give me one chance to make up to you," he cried.

He moved towards her. Muriel raised her eyes to his; then he fell back, for there was that on her face which spoke the story of her life at last to the man who had ruined it. He shrank away, and taking up a book that lay by her side, she said in her ordinary voice :

"I shall be too tired to see Sir John to-night. Would you ask him to put it off till the morning? I suppose they will dine with you? Good-night, we will have more talk to-morrow."

He left the room and went down to his dressing-room, but as he reached the bottom of the turret stairs he paused and listened. Yes, Muriel was walking about above, and he thought he heard a sob. To any ears it must have been a strangely lonely sound, that one sob that broke the stillness of the old tower.

It was indeed that one sound which made it necessary for Lord Cheriton to see the butler and ask for one of the few remaining bottles of a very precious champagne for dinner that night.

CHAPTER XXXIV

WHAT WAS HEARD OF THE CHERITONS

In those hot July days Mrs. Merton began to wonder whether she was really as delicate as she and her friends supposed. She was surprised to find how very much she could do without knocking up, and, later on, she was very grateful for this spurt of nerve power. A day or two after the great doctor's visit, Lady Cheriton sent for her, and, entirely ignoring what had passed between herself and the Vicar, assumed an intimacy with his wife that had never existed before. The Mertons were too deeply interested, too anxious to help her, to admit any smaller feelings, and the Vicar slid into the background, and Mrs. Merton took his place as if it had always been thus. In their first talk Muriel broke down all stiffness by entire confidence on the subject of her health. She spoke of the coming operation as no great matter, and Mrs. Merton, whose sister had had the same thing done for her, was of opinion that it would do Lady Cheriton great and lasting good.

"I am not really nervous about it," Muriel had said, "but I do want to get it over. I am sure I shall not be fit for anything till it is done. So I have persuaded Sir John, when he goes abroad for his holiday, to come to Perledo. Our villa is so high up, right above Lake Como, we shall not be too hot; and both Cheriton and I like to be hot. I

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shall be spared all the inquiries and fidgets that would tease me if I had it done in London. And Perledo is such a perfect spot for a convalescence."

"Then I suppose you will be back in England about the end of September?" asked Mrs. Merton.

"I can't tell anything at all as to further dates," answered Muriel, hastily.

After this, Mrs. Merton was surprised to find Lady Cheriton asking her to master all the complications of her various charities, and the general business of the work for the good of the neighbourhood, which was carried on at the Abbey, and she came away puzzled by her visit. A couple of days passed before it became clear that Lady Cheriton was in fact winding up the work of over ten years, and putting it entirely into her hands; and Mrs. Merton had hardly grasped what was needed of her as to the Cottage Hospital, when she was alarmed to find that she must thoroughly understand the working of the lace industry. The training-school for the village boys, as up-to-date gardeners, was mentioned casually by Muriel as the next job in store for her friend.

After this suggestion Mrs. Merton had hurried home for her children's dinner, during which meal she was unusually silent; and it was not until she had regained her beloved sofa, and was alone with the Vicar, that she began to give vent to her thoughts.

"I am quite certain now," she said abruptly, "that Lady Cheriton does not mean to come back here."

Mr. Merton was in a mood of such depression that no bad news could have surprised him.

"You thought yesterday that she was merely nervous at the prospect of the operation," he said.

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"I think I was wrong; it was her anxiety to get it done so soon, and her persuading Sir John to meet them in Italy, and not to wait till after his holiday, that made me think her nervous. It was clear that the doctors thought there was no hurry. Now, I think the operation is only an excuse for getting away from here."

"My dear, I have the greatest confidence in your intuitions, but you can't expect me to follow you in a different direction every day."

"Of course," mused Mrs. Merton, with closed eyes, as she leaned back on the sofa, "it would make a very good break, and give people something to talk of. She might stay abroad some time for her health, and only come back when she finds out how much they need her here, but ——"

"But —" echoed the Vicar, with a sad smile.

"But," said Mrs. Merton, opening eyes full of tears, "it is my conviction that we shall not see her here again. I think she has come to the end of her strength. At moments she might be fifteen years older than she is, and I have caught a meek, gentle expression on her face that I cannot bear," and Mrs. Merton gave a little sob.

"I wish she would really confide in you," said the Vicar in a tremulous voice, as he rose, and, turning his back to her, stood looking out of the window.

"She is not capable of it," answered his wife. "All this week we have talked as if we were doing everything on the bare chance of the operation turning out badly."

"Did she say to-day when they would go?"

"She said that they intended going abroad in a fortnight. Meanwhile, Lord Cheriton has gone to Cobden, but he will be back here in a few days."

"I heard from Williams, at Cobden, yesterday, and he

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says that he shall be obliged to resign the living if Lord Cheriton goes on bringing down such disreputable company. The house is so near the church—it is disgraceful. Lucy!" (he came back from the window) "do you think she will see me before she goes?"

"I'm afraid not, dear."

"After all these years!" replied the Vicar, somewhat bitterly.

"Do you know," said his wife, "I think she can't bear to see you again, just because she was so fond of you. Her iron will seems to have got some twist, and I feel that it is beyond her own management."

In the meantime, some knowledge of the fact that Lady Cheriton meant to make a complete change in her life had reached two other of her friends, as they would have been called—Horace Colquhoun and, through him, Henry Dacre.

London was very hot, and even the atmosphere of Colquhoun's admirably ventilated rooms was unbearably oppressive.

Horace was lying on the divan by the window, at ten o'clock in the morning, three days after he had left Cheriton by request, and he was occupied in scolding his valet in very unvarnished language. He was one of those men who find an outlet for irritation in minute bullying, and he had been harassing his admirably mannered and imperturbable servant for the past hour. Horace's face was grey, and his lips shook, while his breakfast had been scarcely tasted. When at last there was no excuse by which the valet could be kept in the room any longer to receive the venom which his master's tongue spat out so

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freely, Colquhoun was left alone, and he groaned aloud. He was startled at the sufferings of his own heart—startled to find how deeply one affection had taken root there.

“I have never done him anything but good!” he cried. “Other people—yes, it would have been fair enough if several other people had treated me badly—but Cheriton!” His mind flew back to the days of their boyhood, when they had chummed at Eton:

“I would we were boys as of old
In the field, by the fold:”

Pain without dignity, hurt feeling in a mist of enormous self-delusion, the struggle with the old affection, its transformation into hatred and a wish for revenge—these things do not improve the human countenance. The shrivelled, sallow face that seemed too small for the eyeglass, and the shrunken, bony figure in the silk dressing-gown, were not attractive.

Horace did not move when Lord Berringfield came in, and hardly said “Good-morning,” but looking out of the window, and speaking in a voice that whimpered a little, said, holding out a sheet of paper towards him: “That came last night—read it.” Berringfield threw himself into a chair by the divan, and read through the short note, which was written in an untidy, blotted scrawl:

HORACE :

You have won the bet. I enclose a cheque for £7000, and if I ever wished for anything, I wish now that I may never see you again in this world or in the next.

CHERITON.

“What does it mean?” asked the bewildered young man, and Horace was reminded for the first time that Berringfield

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knew nothing, and ought not, even now, to know anything about the bet. The thought flashed upon him in the same second as the fact that it was too late to conceal the matter.

"It means," he replied in a broken voice, "that I have lost my best friend."

"How can it mean that?" he asked in a tone of puzzled sympathy.

"A year ago," said Horace, "Cheriton was one night worrying me about his troubles with his wife, and saying that he wished to goodness she would divorce him, or even have a separation *en règle*, but that of course she never would. Well, I told him he was quite wrong, and that I was sure she would do it, and he declared that if she consented to a separation within two years he would hand me over £7000. And I said, 'Done,' chaffing, of course. I had almost forgotten the stupid joke; but you see, now, she must be going to separate, and the ass turns round and makes a grievance of it. Of course I shall send him back his money ——"

"Of course!" echoed the younger man.

"And it's d——d ungentlemanly of him to have sent it," continued his friend.

But Berringfield was thinking of the bearings of this information on Lady Cheriton, and what his mother and the world at large would think about it.

"Horace," he said, after a pause, "I wish I knew what makes you so positive about that bit of gossip. It does n't follow, if — Lady Cheriton — is going to have a separation that it has the remotest connection with" — he stopped.

"With Dacre, you mean," put in Horace, crossly. "I can't be bothered to go over that old ground again it's as plain as a pike-staff. I've got my own trials this

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morning. I must consider what to do, and I must, of course, send Cheriton back his cheque. By the way, have you seen the papers yet?"

"Yes; there's nothing in them."

"You can't tell me whether Argentines are as low as yesterday? Just hand me that paper, will you?" and Horace studied stocks and shares until he had decided how he would have invested Cheriton's £7000 if he could in decency have kept them.

Meanwhile, finding that he got no more of Colquhoun's attention, Berringfield, after watching him for a few moments with a sarcastic smile, left him, and strolled out into the Park below.

"He'll tell me soon enough," he thought, "how he speculated with that £7000. Probably when he has lost it! Poor old Colquhoun, he can't keep a thing to himself! His secrets and his money go equally quickly. It's my belief, if Cheriton has really thrown him over, that he'll be a pauper before long!"

But when ruin did threaten for Horace (not for some time yet), he did not turn to Lord Berringfield or to any of the men to whom he had been a social mentor in youth. With a true instinct he appealed to his old enemy, Mr. Biddulph, for help, and the appeal was not made in vain.

During those weeks in which Muriel and Mrs. Merton were so busy at Cheriton, Mr. Biddulph was watching by a death-bed—a friend of many years' standing, not quite in his own rank of life, but with whom he had constantly had business relations. Mr. Stanley was dying of a disease of the spine, and Mr. Biddulph had spent much of his leisure

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time with him for the past six months. They had not been very intimate before this suffering came upon Mr. Stanley but it was curious how those in pain or in great sadness would find that they were far greater friends of Mr. Biddulph's than they had supposed while they were well and happy.

As soon as Parliament rose, and he could leave the Colonial office, Mr. Biddulph hurried down to the Stanleys at Folkestone, and gave up his holiday in their service. He had his reward in his admiration for the dying man, in whom he divined a sanctity and a spirituality that others might not have seen. It was not patience but joy that shone from the ordinary features and dull eyes of the suffering old man of business. And as Mr. Biddulph sat by the bedside, with an awkward tenderness in his dim eyes, peering at the bottles, and the fan, and the fruit with which he was unequal to dealing, he felt that strange glow of triumph which is infectious in the near neighbourhood of martyrs. Pursuing his dim and perilous way amid the unbeliefs, and the foolish beliefs of his day, and of his society, Biddulph had passed on undaunted: but simplicity of faith had not been possible to him. His feet were on a rock of confidence in God, and his mind was infinitely reverent and patient of apparent mystery. But he had known few moments of such soul sunshine as these. He became in love with the unattractive old man he was nursing—he could not repress a tremor in his voice when he spoke of him. To the priest who came to attend him the Under Secretary was so reverent that the good man felt awed, and jumped to the conclusion that this death-bed would produce a conversion to the Catholic Church.

Perhaps in consequence of something the priest said to Mr. Stanley, the latter ventured with a blush, on what he

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feared to be a great intrusion. "No," said Biddulph, gently, "I don't mind. I know what you wish for me, but I can't. If God showed me that it was the truth, I should be very glad, but He has not."

This was spoken with absolute decision, and they never raised the subject again.

For some weeks, Biddulph was absorbed in his friend, and almost impatient of anything that might take his mind from him. Unfortunately, in this life, we cannot afford to live for one thing only, as he realised afterwards to his cost.

One morning, he received two letters which at any other time would have been of absorbing interest. One was from Anne, the other from Muriel. Anne wrote from home:

DEAR MR. BIDDULPH:

I am afraid you are busy, and sorrowful, and that I am going to give you one more sad thing to think of. But, indeed, it is really a thing to be glad of, a great escape for us both.

I know now that I made a great mistake in accepting Mr. Dacre, and I told him so when he came down to Cheriton. You must not be sorry for me. Do you remember saying that sins are punished in the next world but that blunders are punished in this? I shall live down my punishment, and life here is easier than I expected, as my father is more affectionate, and more dependent on my society than he has ever been before. I feel too tired at present for more than this quiet life at home. I know you will feel very kindly to me, so I want to ask you not to let what has passed make any difference in your relations with Henry. Please be as good to him as ever. I ask you this with all my heart, and now forgive me for writing at all. I don't forget to pray for Mr. Stanley.

Yours most sincerely,

ANNE MASSINGHAM.

P. S.—I had almost forgotten to tell you, in case you should see Muriel before she goes to Italy, that I do not want her to know that our engagement is broken off, until after her operation. Altho' I believe that it is not a serious affair, I would rather she had nothing to upset her just now.

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Mr. Biddulph had mingled emotions as he read this letter of compassion, of anger, of pity; but all was dim to him in his present preoccupation. Human life seemed colourless in the valley of the shadow of death.

Muriel's letter was brief. She asked him to meet her in London in three days' time.

"I should like to say good-bye before I start for abroad," she wrote. He glanced at the note almost impatiently. He was feeling most for Anne, and he was trying not to accuse Muriel of being selfish and hard in regard to her. After all, he knew nothing beyond the fact of the engagement being broken off. He had no great wish to see Muriel, and he told himself that he could not possibly leave the Stanleys now. It never struck him that Muriel might be in far greater need of him than even Mr. Stanley. For he knew nothing of her latest trouble. Gossip did not flow quickly in his direction, and he had heard nothing of the growth of Colquhoun's calumny. All he had heard was that Lady Cheriton was not well, and was going for medical treatment abroad. How bitterly in the coming years he regretted that ignorance! As it was, he merely telegraphed to say that he was very sorry he could not come up to London.

Muriel Cheriton went abroad, thinking that surely he might have spared her a few hours.

CHAPTER XXXV

WHAT WAS SAID OF LADY CHERITON

“OH, he is a very odd fellow,” said Lord Berringfield to the four people sitting and standing under the shade of the great oaks in Mr. Maurice’s Yorkshire home.

Mrs. Maurice and Miss Arberton, Lord Berringfield’s eldest sister, were leaning back in deep garden chairs. Mr. Maurice and Mr. Biddulph, who had been walking up and down in serious talk at a little distance, had just strolled up to them.

“He is a remarkable poet, which is a rare oddity, certainly,” said Mr. Maurice. “I have had two of his things cut out of the weekly papers to-day.”

“Yes, if he keeps up to this level,” said Biddulph, “but I doubt if he can. It is such a startling advance on anything he has done before. It looks like one of those erratic gleams of genius that don’t last.”

They were speaking of Henry Dacre.

“You can’t always draw a hard-and-fast line between men of genius and men of talent. A man of talent, under sufficient pressure, may be a man of genius for a time, and then relapse again. I have known several cases where strong emotion or some crisis in life, makes a man produce really remarkable verses, so that he becomes a standing disappointment for ‘all the rest of the time,’ as a Yankee would say.”

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He had forgotten, as he went on speaking, the special application of his words to Henry Dacre. Mrs. Maurice, who tolerated Biddulph better than she did any other of her husband's intellectual friends, looked up at him from under dyed eyelashes and a wonderful garden hat with a humorous and defiant expression.

"The question to my mind is—what strong emotions have had this effect on Mr. Henry Dacre?"

Biddulph gave a rather strained smile. There was a sort of frankness about Mrs. Maurice, that often softened him to her against his judgment, and in spite of his sympathy for her husband. But now she was trenching on a topic in which her coarse touch would be insufferable.

"He is a very odd fellow," repeated Lord Berringfield.

"You have said that before," observed his sister.

"Well, you see I 've spent the last month, or most of it, with him."

"How did he show his oddness?" asked Miss Arberton.

"Oh, I don't know exactly! He began by being awfully good company. Sauteris, Towner, and I were delighted with him; in fact we used to fight a bit every morning as to which of us should be coupled with him. We thought he'd be the making of the tour, and he climbs like a goat. But after a bit, he took to writing poetry, and he got gloomy and wouldn't talk. Then he got all right again, and we thought him the jolliest fellow. Then he'd be back in the dumps again, and we began to wish we hadn't got him. The funniest thing was the night before we went up the Simplon."

"But I thought you said that you and Mr. Sauteris were the only ones who did the Simplon?"

"Yes, because Dacre wouldn't come, and Towner stayed

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with him. The day before, we had been going to lunch at a little inn on the road, when Dacre suddenly refused to come in. He said he saw some bores he knew, through the window, and that he did n't want any luncheon."

"It does not seem particularly odd to avoid bores, does it?" asked Biddulph.

"No, but he looked so queer, and they were two rather harmless Roman Catholic priests. We did the Simplon with them next day, and that was why Dacre would n't come. One was a nice, pale chap called Groves, very keen about the climbing, and though I did n't let him know that we had Dacre with us, he talked a lot about him, thought no end of him, and it seems they had been great chums. But Dacre was as cross as an old bear when I told him."

"Any other signs of oddity?" asked Mr. Biddulph, who had been listening attentively, while Mr. Maurice strolled off by himself.

"Well, you know those verses you were talking about; he wrote dozens of poems, and kept tearing them up. And he wrote a lot of letters to old Colquhoun, and once, when I was taking all the letters, as I was going down to the post-office, he came after me, and took back a letter to Colquhoun, and tore it into bits. Then another odd thing was that he never would look into a church. Sauteris always likes to see churches, even the ugly ones, but Dacre never would go with him. Now would n't you have thought that a chap who writes verses and all that, a Roman Catholic too, would have been a bit interested in churches, studying the life of the country and all that?"

Then, not waiting for an answer, Berringfield went on: "The end of it all was that he suddenly left us, and went off by himself. Of course, we were all soon coming home, so

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it didn't affect us. But one night he got a letter in old Colquhoun's shaky fist, and he was awfully excited, and next morning he was gone before we were up. He left a note for me, saying that he was off, and that he had had an awfully good time, but that he had had a letter which made him think he must hurry up, and leave us to come home in our own way. I thought from the letter that he'd gone home, but Sauteris's servant was positive that he'd gone down to the Italian lakes. He said Dacre had labelled his things to Lugano."

There was a moment's silence. Mrs. Maurice smiled to herself, and Mr. Biddulph looked quite emphatically indifferent.

"Now you'll allow that that's odd," said Lord Berringfield, fixing his boyish eyes for a moment on Mr. Biddulph's face, and then turning to give a surreptitious wink to Mrs. Maurice.

At that moment the host came back, and Mr. Biddulph joined him, and they paced up and down the terrace. Miss Arberton said she must go in to write letters, and Mrs. Maurice and Lord Berringfield were left to themselves. Something had evidently amused them a good deal.

"Poor old Biddulph," laughed Lord Berringfield, "his face was a study," and then they laughed again.

"Of course I knew what was up with Dacre from Horace, who always blabs everything. He has had no end of a row with Cheriton, because the 'virtuous Earl' has veered round, and is furious with his Countess for wanting a separation."

Mrs. Maurice sat up, and positively gasped at the news.

"She is going to be separated," she cried, and clapped

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her hands with delight, though the endless jewels must have hurt her plump fingers. "Of course it means a divorce, and she will marry Henry Dacre. How I shall enjoy seeing all her adorers' faces! Fancy Mr. Biddulph!" and then with a chuckle, "fancy my husband's face! Oh, it is fun! Are you quite, quite sure?"

Berringfield told the story of the bet of £7000, without a pang, and Mrs. Maurice seemed convinced.

"Of course that's why she gave up trying to put him in as member. We could not make out why it was suddenly given up. Lady Turton wrote that it was Muriel Cheriton herself who made Snead keep on as member for another year. She must have suddenly made up her mind to give it all up and marry him. Oh, it is rich!"

"Poor old Dacre's mind has been running on the divorce courts," giggled Lord Berringfield. "I remember we chaffed him, because he had been sitting gazing in his moony way at the paper, and he said quite suddenly: 'They gave a divorce yesterday, and there was no evidence of cruelty at all.' And Bill Towner said: 'Dear me, how interesting — was the lady a friend of yours?' How we did laugh!"

"But I don't understand," said Mrs. Maurice, "why she has taken Lord Cheriton abroad with her now. Only that it is so like Muriel Cheriton to do things in a round-about way. You know she made a most ridiculous fuss about this operation. Sir John is back in London, and he told Mr. Biddulph that it had been a slight affair, and that she would soon be quite well again. Lady Turton says that she behaved at Cheriton as if it were a matter of life and death. 'People were so busy,' she writes, 'talking about Lady Cheriton's health, that they quite forgot to talk of her

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morals.' That's rather well put for Lady Turton, is n't it? By the way, where exactly is their Italian villa? Somewhere on Lake Como, is n't it?"

"Yes, high up above Varenna, an awfully jolly place. I say I shall never forget old Biddulph's face when I said that Dacre had labelled to Lugano."

"Are Lugano and Lake Como very near together?"

"Oh yes, it's the regular way to Lake Como of course. You go down from the town of Lugano, across the lake in a steamer, and then you take a steam tram from Porlezza to Menaggio on Lake Como, and you are straight opposite to Varenna. I bet you anything he is there now. But what's up?"

For at that moment they saw Mr. Biddulph and Mr. Maurice meet a servant with a telegram. The telegram was for Mr. Biddulph; he read it and handed it at once to his companion.

"It is something very serious," said the statesman's wife as she watched their faces. "Bad news from the Colonial Office, I suppose, as it is for Mr. Biddulph; but anyhow they won't want us."

And in that at least she was perfectly right.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE MESSAGE FROM PERLEDO

IT is quite true that only that enchanting lake passage from Lugano to Porlezza, and half an hour in a steam tram, was all that separated Henry from Menaggio, and that Menaggio is just on the opposite shore to Varenna, on the Lake of Como. But as Dacre did not leave Lugano for nearly a week, he only reached Varenna the day before Lord Berringfield gave news of him to the Maurices, and Mr. Biddulph received so "very serious" a telegram under the spreading oak-trees of their Yorkshire home. He had slept at Menaggio, although a tempting steamer was ready to take him across in a mere ten minutes to the Hotel Royale at Varenna, and he could even distinguish the white terrace of the hotel gleaming in the setting sun. But next morning brought more courage, and too impatient to wait for the steamer, he took a little boat and rowed himself across.

He pulled hard, enjoying the exercise, and finding a relief for his nerves in the use of his muscles. But in the middle of the lake, half-way between the gleaming coasts, with Bellagio on the wooded headland to his left, and the terraced gardens of the villas by Cadenabbia before him, he stayed still for a longish rest. Not that he was looking with admiring eyes at anything in the heavens above, nor at the snow-topped mountains

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between the sky and the lake, or in the water beneath that reflected them; these things were nothing to him. He had not even tried to do the impossible, and make out the Cheritons' villa, above what he had discovered to be the white-washed façade of the Church of Perledo, half-way up the mountains, above Varenna. As he sat there, the water dripping from his oars, his eyes seemed to be seeking the bottom of the lake; and the men and women, in more than one boat, passing him by, wondered what the handsome Englishman in the white flannels, with the curly dark head, could be gazing at. At last he put a hand in his pocket, and for the thousandth time drew out the letter in Colquhoun's "shaky fist," which Lord Berringfield had seen him receive the night before he left his friends so abruptly.

It must have been owing to the mists of the unreal world in which Henry had been living for weeks past that he did not recognise the ring of the special pleaders arguments in Colquhoun's letter. He did not even question Horace's motives, or suspect the longing for revenge that was eating him up. It had been Horace's *métier* for so many years to look after Lord Cheriton's affairs that he could not in any case have left him alone; habit was too strong for him. And as Colquhoun wrote the letter, he rejoiced to think that he knew how best to wound Cheriton now, and how to humble Lady Cheriton. But Henry, with the egotism of passion, took the letter very simply.

"No, my dear Dacre," the letter said, "it is all very well for you to be so charmingly modest, and so discreetly despairing, and to write poems so eloquently expressive. But to tell you the truth you are positively exasperating to a cool looker-on like myself. Don't waste your time writing

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me any more accounts of your own unworthiness; that isn't the point. Good gracious heavens, whoever said you were worthy? Not I for one. Hate and its opposite are never by any chance reasonable. If you were all you say you wish you were, and, excuse plain speaking, that you are quite right in saying you are not, would a woman, would even a goddess be in the least more likely to fall in love with you? She might, of course, because she may do anything wise or foolish, but it's not the least likely that she'd do the wise thing rather than the foolish thing. You know the reverse is much the commonest. So please stop writing any more of your egotistical modesty and nonsense to your humble servant, because he is sick of it.

"As to waiting to see what she does when she gets back to England, I think you are altogether wrong. As I read it, and I know my lady pretty well, she went abroad intending you to follow her. Otherwise, why not have the operation at home? There was no sort of hurry. I read it, as I say, that she wanted to get it over quickly, and to be ready to begin a new life. She only took Cheriton abroad to look respectable, and to silence the gossip of the county. The separation between them is an absolutely fixed thing. It is clear to me that she meant to part with him, and settle things with you out of reach of the gossiping English world. Now that she is quite well again, Cheriton is going or has already gone, to Homburg, as his valet writes to mine. Man alive, don't you see——"

"Eh, eh! Oh, Oh!" were shrieked at Dacre, and a clamour of Italian voices made him look up only just in time to get out of the way of a large boat laden with a cargo of bark. In a few moments, he found himself on the Varenna side of the boat, and his mind was made up; and though physically

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he still faced Menaggio, he had mentally turned his back on that little town, and on many other things as well.

“You know Lord Cheriton’s villa, then?”

“Perfectly; his lordship often dines here with his friends from Bellagio. I can send the note from here easily. How long will the boy take to come and go? Oh, about one hour and a half. Will you have *déjeuner* while you wait? On the terrace? Yes, certainly,” and the waiter hustled away.

Henry went down the steps to the terrace, and had luncheon there, but more than that he could never remember of the Hotel Royale at Varenna. Nothing came back to him afterwards, for he had seen very little, not even the famous cactus that stands out half-way between the terrace and the water, and which Tennyson had noted so admiringly in the Visitor’s Book. He might never have leaned over the old wall, and gazed at that wonderful world of mountains and of water, never have turned to look at the castle ruins frowning on the hill behind him.

Our world is not in what we see, but in what we carry about with us, and “under the pressure of strong emotion, or at some crisis in life,” to borrow Biddulph’s phrase, all external things may be blotted out, or may become painfully impressive. There is no rule, but with Henry that day it was the former. He only saw feverishly in his mental vision his brief note—(had the note really seemed as natural as he had wished to make it?)—telling Lady Cheriton that he had come over for the day from Menaggio, and asking if he might come up to the villa to see her. He seemed possessed, as time dragged on, with the idea of the actual slip of paper. He seemed to see it in the rough

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hands of the boatman's boy, whom the waiter said he had given it to, in the care of the Cheritons' butler, and then in those long thin fingers that would be thinner than before her illness. Probably she would not be wearing any rings. She always seemed indifferent to her jewels, he fancied. Magnificent as they were they were never somehow vulgarly *en évidence*. He saw the note in those hands, then, when she had read it would she take a pen — writing things were always near her — and would she write — ?

"Very sorry, sir," came the waiter's staccato accents, "very stupid boy, — got a message for you, — it was English, — he is Italian boy, and know no English. There was a message."

Henry glanced ferociously at the harmless little waiter who added hurriedly, "but there is this card too, and something written I think, sir."

Henry clutched at the visiting card; it was Lady Cheriton's, and on it he could just distinguish in faint pencil marks the words "Come after six." That was all, but was it not enough?

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE LIGHT BEHIND

IT was an Italian garden in the Renaissance style, formal, with dark cypress and ilex trees cutting with hard outlines against fading plaster walls, that were still brilliant with colour in the midday sun. But now, evening was closing in, and long shadows from the cypresses were merging into the general gloom. Languid enjoyment exhaled from a twilight full of sweet scents, while glimpses of wondrous crimson clouds, seen between the branches, threw each palm spike into black distinctness.

To Henry, Italy was a new experience. Rich with past dreams, it would in any case have quickened his imagination, and he would have clothed every laurel bush, every statue, with a glory not its own. To-night, as he passed into the garden he was not in a condition to recognise the fitness to himself of his surroundings. Greek art had worshipped beauty in a far other spirit than the Renaissance. It aspired to the highest it knew, whereas Renaissance art was essentially apostate, having tasted, and rejected a better thing. Hence it could never be simple, or spontaneous, nor could Henry, however much his self-consciousness was lost in intoxication.

But since he had read that note, his insensibility to outer things had vanished. It seemed to him as he trod the long alley under the pergola, that the world and life had never

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been so rich; for mother earth does “ pay her children on a Saturday,” and he was rapturously content in her rewards. The fading light caught his face, which was wonderfully beautiful that evening, full of exuberance of life as he trod the gravel path, too well worn to crunch beneath his light step. He paused for a moment where the sides of the pergola opened, showing two alcoves formed by clipped ilex trees. In the one an Antinous looked down indifferently on the rank grass and trailing weeds about his feet. The statue was scarcely more beautiful than this latest favourite of the common mother. But there was no living being there to greet Henry any more than on the other side, where a late Italian satyr, gnome-like, earthy, and possessing a spirit very evil, might have seemed to mock him, had he heeded, with a scoffing laugh too ill-natured to warn. He was coming to the end of the alley—surely she must be very near him now. The English servant had told him that he would find her in the pergola; but Henry hesitated—his courage failed him for a moment; and it came over him that this wondrous woman of the world, who must have known far more accomplished lovers, would surely find him unequal to his part. It was an abasement the more, and he was feeling conscious of it when a low voice quite near him murmured:

“Who is there? Is it Henry?”

“Yes, Lady Cheriton,” he cried as composedly as he could; “are you playing at hide-and-seek?”

“Go back as far as the faun, and then walk round it.”

He did as he was told, and there, in a little green space like a room, walled high with ilex and box, lying on a long wicker couch, was Lady Cheriton, dressed in trailing white garments, with a rose-coloured silk cloak that he remem-

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bered only too well, thrown over the couch, forming a background to her face, at which he hesitated to glance. She, too, seemed embarrassed, and her hand struck cold in his. Then hastily pointing to a gap in the green walls, she said, still in a low, hesitating voice :

“ See what a view! I can lie here in the shade and look at that.”

Henry gazed, with eyes that did not see, at low vine-clad hills, overtopped by a great mountain range now rosy in the sunset light. He felt that Lady Cheriton was looking at him. How long it was since he had looked at her! One glance now, and his soul would, he felt, with a new intensity, take in, in an instant, to the full, the joy of life, the suggestion of which lay all about him.

At length he found courage to turn, and their eyes met. He caught his breath; there was something in the helpless, almost imploring look that met his, in the dull veil that had come upon her beauty that struck him with terror. It was the face of a dying woman. Her hair was dusky against the crimson silk; her face was slightly flushed; her white hands—he had been right, they were without rings—plucked a little at her draperies.

Henry stood silent, rooted to the spot. The glance from those eyes, which used to light up his whole nature, and make all life seem so fair to him, had in a moment passed their death-chill into his heart.

She seemed troubled at his silence.

“ You understood ? ” she said at length, and he felt that she spoke with difficulty; “ did they not tell you about me this morning ? Ah, I see they did not! I told them to let you know that I was very ill. I know that I cannot live. It began quite suddenly—only yesterday. How strange you

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must have thought it! How—" she closed her eyes, and there was silence again. Her face worked, as if she might be about to cry.

"Never mind," she went on, "if there has been a mistake the explanation is very near"—the last words were touched with irony—"you are in time, and I am sure you will understand, only come very close."

Henry knelt beside her, and could see the white fold above her chest rise and fall with her laboured breathing.

"It seemed when I got your note as if you had been sent to me. I know no one here, and I had been longing for somebody, just to tell me how you die—Catholics, I mean. I don't want a priest. I can't make a business of it—I am too tired. One of your poems—things you have said made me think you could help me." There was a moment's silence, and then the words escaped like a faint breath of air: "You will—won't you?"

Henry's head sank; he could not speak, he was tongue-tied. Her hand was close to his head, wandering a little uncertainly near him. He shrank from it—for him to touch it now were desecration.

"I have spoken too suddenly; I have startled you; you are young; you don't know. Oh, but you *can* help me! Surely I have not made a mistake." There was anguish, terror in the voice. "It is too late to get any one else."

Henry rose. "No, no," he said soothingly, "I know—I have learnt. May I have a few minutes first?"

"Yes," she answered, "five minutes, will that do? Go, don't be longer."

Her eyes closed, her hands were still moving. Before he had time to leave her, she looked round, and pointed to

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a glass on a table on the other side of her. He stretched across the couch, and reached it.

"Give me a spoonful," she said.

His hand shook so much that he upset the first spoonful, but he filled the spoon again, and put it to her lips.

"Don't go far," she almost whispered; "I sent the nurse away."

Henry turned through the open space in the tall hedge, and the wide landscape lay before him,—rough, broken ground at his feet, the eternal hills, and the great sweep of the heavens above. But he was in the grip of an anguish that mastered him, body and soul, and he was hardly conscious of more than physical pain. No vision of a God either threatening or merciful came to him, only an overpowering conviction of his awful unfitness to minister to the dying woman. She was no longer Lady Cheriton, for Lady Cheriton had been the world to him, and now she belonged to it no more. She was not the woman he had loved with such a sacrifice of all the best in himself. She was to him only a soul passing in its agony, asking him how to pass, how to cling to the cross of the Master whom he had denied. And the apostate knew—that was what came to him clearly with an overwhelming knowledge, that drove out all else—no nun at her prayers in any convent of that countryside knew better than he, what Lady Cheriton must do now.

The great sky above, the darkening earth beneath, the whole vast world about them was but the theatre for this one act—to die. The awe of it thrilled him; he kissed the broken earth, put his forehead to it, whispered "*Domine non sum dignus*" and stood up. As he returned through the green wall, he started at the change in

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Muriel's face. It seemed to have grown more grey. Her eyes were not quite closed, her mouth was a little open. Henry was terrified. Had that been indeed the end? and a sudden tempest of wrath and pity took him. Where was her husband? her nurse? where were her servants? Was she to die out on this hilltop, alone with one who had come—ah, his very presence was a desecration! He was almost startled to hear her say slowly and distinctly:

“I have been asleep. I am sorry if I have kept you waiting.”

“*Kept you waiting*”—it is what the dying often say. How long seems that time from which they are almost detached! How it must drag for them! They cannot bear the thought of others waiting. But there was no one there who felt, as at other death-beds, that all their future lives would be but a waiting, till death should bring them to meet this dying one again. It was the lonely end of a lonely life.

“What must I do?” she asked, and her eyes rested as with comfort on Henry’s altered face. His whole attitude was now that of a priest or doctor, revealing an unconscious taking of responsibility upon himself.

“It is very simple,” he said; “I know you have been baptised—I know”—and his voice did not even tremble—“that you love God. Now, would you believe whatever He wished you to believe, if you knew that He wished it?”

“Of course,” came very faintly from her lips.

“That must be your act of faith.”

“Yes,” and there was a childlike ring in the voice.

“Then say these acts after me.”

“Not too fast,” she pleaded, and groped in the direction

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of the glass. He moistened her lips again, and she repeated after him, very slowly:

“O my God, I believe in Thee, and in all that Thou willest I should believe.

“O my God, I hope in Thee, for grace and for glory, because of Thy promises, Thy mercy, and Thy power.

“O my God, I love Thee with my whole heart, and for Thy sake I love my neighbour as myself.

“O my God, I am truly sorry for having offended Thee, because Thou art so good, and by Thy help I will not sin again.”

It was long before she had finished, with halting, laboured breath, her voice at times almost painfully distinct, at others sinking into a whisper.

“You see,” he said gently, when the prayers were finished, “faith in all that God has revealed, sorrow for sin, because it has offended the God we love, and love towards all men for His sake.”

“Write the prayers down please; there is a writing-case.”

Henry took the case off the table.

“Write it large.”

Placing the desk upright on the chair near him, he knelt down, and wrote out the acts.

“You are sure that is all I need say and feel?”

“That you need say and *will*, not feel ; never mind the mere feeling.”

Something caught at his heart at those words ; how could he dare ? He brought the sheet of paper to her.

“Thank you. Will you say them again ? I will listen. And if I die, willing and wishing all in that prayer, shall you and Anne hope for me, in spite of my sins ?”

“Even if they were as scarlet, they would be washed

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white as snow," came in broken accents from the sinner beside her who had not done penance.

"Would not a priest ask me if I had forgiven everybody?"

Henry hesitated a second. He had heard a learned doctor of the Church say that no priest need tempt a dying man with the concrete thought of individual enemies — love and forgiveness towards all mankind were enough. A look betokening that struggle which he would fain spare the dying woman passed over Muriel's face, and Henry was not surprised at her next faltered words :

"Will you ask my husband to come here?"

He moved as if to obey.

"Stay," she said, "it is good-bye."

He tried to speak, and knelt down beside her, not daring to kiss her outstretched hand. She touched his dark hair.

"Give Anne my love. I have always been fond of Anne. Tell her that you taught me the prayers—and did not stay—no, no, I don't mean that." Her face grew troubled again. "Promise me that you will make her very happy. I don't see any clouds over you two. You will pray for me?"

Blinding tears came to help him. He would not for the world have told her the truth about himself and Anne. She only heard that he was weeping.

"May n't I come again?" he asked when he could command his sobs.

"No, I hope it will be to-night; but if not, I will see no one now but my husband."

The last words struck Henry as with a martyr's touch; she would die alone with that brute. He tried to protest,

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when he heard a step on the path outside; it was the nurse coming with quiet tread and cheerful face.

"Medicine time," she said quietly; "I hope you have n't been naughty, and talking too much."

Muriel smiled faintly, as Henry moved away; but he saw that her face was lit with the still radiance of spiritual joy. The strange lines of the dying form, that lay against the blurred rose-colour, and the now murky background of the trees, made a picture in his mind that never grew less vivid. The last thing he noted was the uncertain groping of the thin hands, that like those of an infant moving aimlessly to and fro. He passed hastily along the pergola, and mounted the steps to the door of the villa. The English valet answered the bell.

"Lady Cheriton wishes to see Lord Cheriton in the garden."

"His lordship is just going down to dine at the hotel," and the valet looked as if the suggestion were an impertinence.

At that moment, the nurse ran round the corner of the house.

"His lordship must come at once; there is a great change."

The woman hurried away, and Henry slowly left the garden. He turned up the darkening road, and climbed higher and higher, till the villa and gardens were left behind, and only steep rocks rose above him. The stars came out, and showed a track, which he followed, only craving for silence and solitude. He knelt down at length beneath a rock, and the stars, that had seen Peter go forth from the Judgment Hall, testified to the angels that they might rejoice in the bitter weeping of one who had denied his Lord.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

MR. BIDDULPH HAS THE LAST WORD

M R. MAURICE and Mr. Biddulph sat in silence in the train together, as long as they could see the dark outline of Cheriton Abbey frowning over the valley. Their thoughts were akin, for they dwelt not on the Abbey, or on the friends they had left there,—for many people had been gathered at Cheriton on that glorious September day. The two men saw the whole of the wooded hills, and the grand old pile of buildings only as the surroundings of a tomb; and their minds dwelt on the vault that lay beneath the ancient parish church, and on the coffin which they had seen lowered to its resting-place that morning.

A more perfect ceremony they had seldom witnessed, and the vast number of people assembled had seemed but to accentuate the simplicity and religious feeling of the whole. But one moment stood out alone in Mr. Biddulph's memory.

The workmen of the estate had carried the coffin down the great avenue crowded by the tenants and the poor of the town. Lord Cheriton and Mr. Biddulph whom he had begged not to leave him, had followed first; then had come Lord Massingham, Mr. Maurice and the chief men of the neighbourhood, and afterwards Lady Anne, Lady Jane, Lady Berringfield, and several more. The sunshine

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was brilliant, and the “happy autumn fields” that lay full in their view, as they passed under the avenue of chestnuts and moved slowly towards the church, seemed painfully redolent of a life that was passing away. Nothing broke the stillness save the dull tramp of their feet. An intolerable weight of grief oppressed Mr. Biddulph; he could hardly see the way before him. His mind was black with useless regrets, with hard thoughts of the wretched man beside him, of the crowds of poor, whose tears were an unreality and a mockery to him,—black, too, with a bitter sense of having failed his friend, and with the still more bitter recollection that would intrude, of a certain disappointment mingled with his aching love of the dead woman. While he stumbled along, blind and self-contemning, there rang out, in Mr. Merton’s clearest tones from the lych-gate, like a great note from a trumpet, like a wave of light breaking through the midst of darkness, like a burst of harmony rising above discord, the words, “*I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord.*” That was all that Biddulph remembered. Not the weeping crowd, not her husband, not Anne, not Dacre—not any of them all mattered. God alone, with Divine egotism, bade them realise, not only that He had given what He had taken away, not that He had crushed an earthly life, and had laid low the power of man, but that He was now simply what He had always been—her resurrection and her life. A profound peace fell upon Biddulph. His dim eyes filled with tears, and he stumbled, so that Lord Cheriton caught his arm, or he would have fallen on the worn steps that led up to the church.

Now, as it was all over, and he was going away, that moment stood out as the keynote of the day. But soon

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the train—he and Maurice had been obliged to leave early — took them out of sight of the richly wooded hills above Cheriton, and quite away from the shadow of the Abbey walls. The dull reaction of every-day life threatened him.

“When did you go down?” asked Mr. Maurice.

“I have been with Cheriton since he reached London. He sent for me as soon as he got back, and put everything into my hands.”

“Then that was why it was all so admirably done. I had dreaded to-day, but —”

“No,” interrupted Biddulph, “it was all settled by Lady Cheriton herself, even to the choosing of the anthem—every detail. She had too a remarkable sketch of a tomb for herself and Cheriton.”

“Then she thought the operation might be dangerous?”

“As far as I can make out, she had no fears as to the operation. All this preparation was done some years ago; she was not a person to leave things to themselves. But there had recently been a great change in all her plans, and what has come to me as a surprise is that just before going abroad, she told Cheriton that she meant never to go back to the Abbey.”

Maurice gave a start of astonishment.

“Did she mean to get rid of him?” he asked. Mrs. Maurice had not told him of Lord Berringfield’s indiscretions.

“Yes. They were going to have a legal separation this winter.”

There was another silence, then Mr. Maurice, looking away, with a touch of his House of Commons manner of perfect indifference, said in his low, penetrating voice :

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"Did she intend to marry Dacre?"

"No, certainly not," answered the other. Then, with a visible effort, he continued:

"I have seen Dacre this afternoon. You were all quite right. He was madly in love, but he never breathed a word of it to her, though he intended to do so, and had laid his plans in his own mind. He had thrown over his principles and his religion in the wild hope of winning her. As soon as it was reported that she was convalescent, he followed her to Italy, and by the merest accident arrived at the villa, on the day that her heart suddenly failed. He saw her by appointment three hours before she died. She kept him some twenty minutes, and made him write down the Roman Catholic prayers for the dying, sent messages to Lady Anne, said good-bye to him, and sent him to fetch Cheriton, who told me the rest. Cheriton knelt by her, repeating the prayers Dacre had written out for her, till she became unconscious. Think," he went on sadly, "of Cheriton repeating acts of Faith, Hope, and Charity, while she died."

"And what is Cheriton's state of mind?" asked Maurice, after a moment's silence. "Now that he has got his freedom, I suppose he will induce some other woman to marry him almost at once."

"No, I think not," replied Biddulph, with a faint smile; "his attitude reminds me more of that of George the Second at his wife's death-bed."

"Lady Anne looked fearfully white to-day," observed Mr. Maurice presently.

"Yes, but there was that in her face that makes one think of angels or little children. You saw Dacre. Cheriton absolutely forced him to come, and I think it was

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quite right." And Biddulph added to himself, "he did not meet Lady Anne even for a moment." Then aloud, "I took him into the park during the luncheon, and he has gone home. I confess that, as we talked, my wrath melted. We all made a mistake in taking him too seriously. He was only a boy. Now sorrow has made him a man. His imagination and his adaptability made him a weak boy, but it does not follow that he will be a weak man. Curiously enough when he has gained, as I believe he will, the grit and firmness that were lacking, he will be less attractive to women in general. What they liked in him was the nature of a boy under the semblance of a man. For the moment his ambitions are dead. Cheriton insisted that I should press him at once to stand for the division, as soon as old Snead retires. I could n't do it. I saw that he would n't be able to bear it yet. I'll try again later; I have no doubt Cheriton is right, and he would have a walkover; there is such a reaction. They would do anything they think would have pleased Lady Cheriton."

"How did he dare fancy himself in love with her? Did she ever give him the slightest encouragement?"

"No," answered Biddulph, "but he was very young, and, as I was saying, curiously immature. He had been brought up in almost monastic ignorance of the world, and he was naturally sanguine. And she—well, Maurice, is it so very hard to understand? She wished to be doing good to some one. He interested and excited her. She believed in his genius. He was the latest peg for her ambition; her sense of her own powers carried her away, and she became selfish in it perhaps, and I think would not face the possibility that she was doing mischief, while

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she was making a politician out of the raw material, and helping forward a clever youth, without interest to back him. But she must have been uneasy towards the end, must have known that she had done harm. Just after the operation—"he checked himself, he had no right to betray Anne's secret, and he thought of her face, as he had seen it to-day, so beautiful in its sorrow. His mind turned to a little fact that had been confided to him by the hospital nurse, who had been with Lady Cheriton at the end.

The nurse had told him that in a short time of great suffering that had followed the operation, her patient had said to her:

"Is it true, do you think, that God accepts pain as an offering? that you can bring good to others by it? It would be a great help, a great consolation, if I could be sure of that. I do so long to make two people happy; I am afraid I have done them harm."

"Such a prayer *must* be heard," muttered Biddulph, half aloud.

His companion, thinking he was spoken to, turned towards him, and something in the statesman's smooth face startled him. In his own grief, in the misery of feeling that he had failed Muriel when he was most wanted, after years spent in her friendship and service, Biddulph had forgotten the history of the man beside him. Now he remembered.

"No," he repeated, "I am certain that she was never in the least touched by Dacre. If it is any comfort to you to know it," he added almost enviously, "you were her only temptation."

Maurice turned his back to Biddulph, and the House of

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Commons voice was a little lower, but as distinct as usual, as he spoke.

"But as she would not let herself care for me, whom did she love?"

Biddulph hesitated.

"I do not think she ever knew any absorbing human love. I suppose her way had to be a lonely one. And yet the human heart is made for love."

Biddulph paused. He seemed to be speaking more to himself than to James Maurice.

"With all her faults," he went on, "I think she ever craved for something worthy of her love, and often saw the sacred aureole where God has placed it and the world overlooks it."

Then, with his usual indifference as to whether he should be understood or not, he concluded: "Yes; as she went 'about the city, in the streets and in the broadways,' with a dim vision she was seeking, on the whole faithfully, for the source of all love. She has found Him now. And," he added almost inaudibly, "He will be her exceeding great reward."

THE END

One Poor Scruple

By
Mrs. Wilfrid Ward

The Outlook: "The characterisation is delicate : aesthetic insincerities, deep pieties, social pettinesses, worldly difficulties and dissatisfactions, are cunningly set forth and exemplified in Mrs. Ward's crowd of characters, for they live and move. The most arresting aspect of the book is its reality of effect. It is distinguished work, strong, but quiet and discreet : the writer has not over-emphasised any side of her ability. Such over-emphasis of undeniable gifts is the besetting sin of many most able living writers ; Mrs. Wilfrid Ward is entirely free from it. So, whether she introduces us to saints, to sinners, or to the strange average of poor humanity, she writes as a fine discerning artist."

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